Poetry

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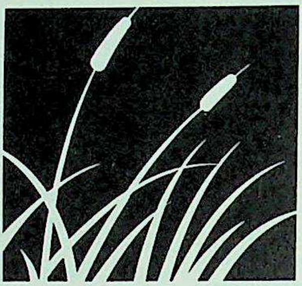

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"Ghosts," Pen with Ink, 1983
Courtesy The Art Institute of Chicago

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POETRY

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हरिद्वार

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TYPOGRAPHY BY GREER ALLEN

POETRY

APRIL 1986

DAVID WAGONER

ODE TO TWELVE YARDS OF UNSCREENED FILL DIRT

The dumptruck left the rough-and-tumble angles
Of your repose in the shape of my weekend:
A hundred cartloads of earth for me to move
From curbside to back yard to make a garden.

Among your clods like a curriculum vitae
In a kitchen midden: the corpse of an azalea,
A gunnysack, and potshards from nursery days;
From wreckers' claims, rough nuggets of concrete;

From pastoral years, the blanched, beheaded root-balls
Of buttercup and sorrel looking bewildered
By the shift of scene, by one more rearrangement
Of zenith and nadir at the turn of a spade;

And stones, from warblers' eggs to pterodactyls—
All part of your bedload on another journey
Without the benefit of running water,
Mud flow, mantle creep, or freeze-thaw prying.

You've been here before as part of these foothills
Where the downpour of coastal storms and mountain snowmelt

Meet in crosscurrents. You aged on a forest floor,
Were washed from creek to river to flood plain,

Meandered to brushy swamp, and settled down
To pasture, holding your own. Now hold again
Young ferns and moss, the nurse-logs I bring to you,
Matrix of all beginnings. Come to bed.

FOR A THIRD ANNIVERSARY

You brought me wildflowers once, not the real ones
You'd learned and loved after school along the roadside
April by April, after the city fathers
Had cut them down—*poppies and vetch, pentstemon*
And bleeding heart—not the ones you'd gathered
For other grudging teachers who'd held your life
And your life-to-be too lightly, but words in a poem.

You set them down so gently, so carefully,
So quietly, I almost didn't notice
They were saying goodbye to me. *Cut flowers*, you said,
Rootless. Bright awkward moments already wilting.
No sweets, no charms, no dancing, you said, but words
Like flowers, *removed from life*. A lesson in loss.

Years late, into the yard behind the house
We share, I bring my answer: riverstones,
Deer fern, moss, and stumps from forest floors,
Survivors of neglect and mayhem, like words.
From among them, from what seemed a barren garden
As bleak as hope, come yellow violets,
Starflowers, and wild red currant.

THE ASTRONOMER'S APPRENTICE

Some dark shadows were soon noticed crossing the Sun, and afterwards some light streaks . . . their frequency first and then their uniformity of direction . . . indicating that an unusual phenomenon was in progress . . . .

Summary of a letter from Mysore Province, India,
ROYAL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY,
MONTHLY NOTICES, 1870.

Observing the noon sun over Bangalore
Through a five-inch equatorial refractor,
Professor A.S. Herschel's assistant saw
Odd shadows move across that circle of fire
And beyond its borders where, against the sky
Like streams of meteors, they turned luminous.

Rubbing his eyes, he ruled out sparks and birds,
Then made his notes: *Motion irregular*
Like particles suspended in crosscurrents;
Their number anything short of infinite;
Distance uncertain; spectrum solar; brightness
Diminishing as they leave the edge of the disc;

Their form like halfmoons sailing diameter
Forward or edgeways; sometimes almost stellar,
Distinct and brilliant; at others, double crescents
Crossbarred, trailing winglike appendages.
In Professor Herschel's absence, he beamed with joy
And traced these mysteries to the brim of evening.

He saw his fortune there in a gold shower
Bearing his name with other great dead lucky
Stargazers who had brought new wonders to light,
Who'd fixed their positions with cartographers'
And now lay scattered along the bright ecliptic
Like gods and heroes drawn into constellations.

That night he even dreamed the envious demons
That ruled the world were driven by Lord Vishnu
(The All-pervader on his giant bird)
To dance a lament on fire across the heavens
Forever, and he alone, like a favorite prince
Among earthlings, had been chosen as a witness.

All the next day he marked time with his fame
And tracked the procession north into a dazzling
Pavilion raised for a Lord of Astronomers.
On the third day, there fell at Hyderabad
Three hundred miles to the north a cloud of locusts
That ravaged everything green under the sun.

GAIL MAZUR

SPRING PLANTING

This is the season
when our friends may and will die daily.
Robert Lowell, "Soft Wood"

Last year's sunflower stalks blacken
at dusk, their huge exploded suns
droop like the heads of mourners,
frozen in sombre procession.

I carry my seedlings from the car—
snap peas, radishes, an experimental
pole bean . . .
My little green homunculi,
my hostages to a future season, you've
hardened in April's tonic breeze.

We say you'll bear in so many weeks,
that we'll be here to share the fruit—
it's easy to imagine the future wrong.

The four-year mimosa tree stands pale
and spring-naked, a body's length taller
than last year, and seems to belong.

Years back, at Temple Israel Sunday School
on Saturdays, we donated flattened one-dollar bills
for planting trees in new-born Israel.
Survivors would "make the desert bloom"—
Reform American kids helped prevent erosion.
I imagined dark enormous pines,
my father's sweet name
a plaque on one I'd never find . . .

My friend, your last days among us,
you were such a frail leaf tossing
in pain's hurricane, until morphine
finally took you to sleep with my other
lost ones in a distant forest . . .
I place
the flats on the ground by a rusty trowel.
Soon, when the mimosa blossoms again,
its delicate pink blooms will sway
in the Cape's harsh wind, and drop—

oriental creature, its feathery flowers
are evanescent as the colorless smoke
your last cigarette blew across my room.

JON VEINBERG

SPARROWS AS GHOSTS

1

Night should sound like rain
and smell of honeysuckle.
It is tobacco and dust.
It is the memory of my mother
bandaging my eye,
warning me of high rocks
and slippery ledges.
It is the outline of a perfumed woman
dropping her pearls to the floor.
It is always the knock
I am afraid to answer.
Someone from very far away
is brewing coffee
and singing in my kitchen.
The sparrows are playing a mad dance
on my roof.

2

My blind neighbor hangs
her wash in the sun.
Apricots pile up at her ankles
and her red scarf flaps
like a tied wing in the breeze.
She talks to herself
of coral and amethyst,
the first brooch her husband
pinned to her collar,
how he sat on the steps

and picked off three sparrows
from the clothesline with one shot.
The russet feathers float in and out
of her shadow as she walks
and while she sleeps
they line up like wooden soldiers
across the foot of her bed.

3

April and the nest is layered—
threads of straw, stalk of mint,
black twig and red bone of geranium.
At this time the sparrows fly
low to the ground, confined to the damp leaves
and shining slivers of grass.
In another hour the moon will eclipse,
fern will draw in its fan and the eggs will crack.
At midnight my father comes to me in a dream.
He looks as if he has walked through
a field of wet hay. From his hand
he unfurls two sparrows who fly blindly into the wall.
He inspects their frail necks
and gives a cry to their wild flight. This winter,
he says, something close to you will die.

4

I cannot like them, the sparrows,
how they rise so quickly above me
and dip their frantic beaks to the bums
who wander Tulare Street, tossing them
green crusts and petting them to sleep
in their coat pockets. How can I trust
the widow down the block who wraps
their hurt wings in gauze,

feeds them from a dropper, and goes door to door
handing out pictures of Jesus?
Sometimes I imagine them, after my death,
tugging my limp bones out of the ground
and carrying them piece by piece
to a cooler climate or, perhaps,
a place where they will burn like hell.
Today I'll go outside
and size myself up against them.
But it will be of little use,
they are much larger than me.

MARTHA

Today the flies buzz the kitchen in peace.
Let the coats mend themselves
and the lard gleam on the stove like ice.
Let the lillies whither in the sun
and the dogs yelp at the back door.
Let the priest bind her feet in black rags.
Never mind the safety pin posing as a clasp
or the mismatched button. How much could it matter
if she missed stitching a thread or two
or sang to the dead behind the cemetery fence.
Let them pat someone else's blond rump
and praise their sluggish legs.
Let the spoons shine on their own.
She sat at the window and dreamt of maple trees,
the blue light that inhabited the scoured branches.
To her maple trees had no pain.
In another year she'd have turned fifty,
in another hour she'll collapse in the mud.
Wish her ghost an afternoon stitched in gold leaves,
a valley scorched clean by wind.
There's bound to be lanes of maples there
to carve her broad fingers into.
Maple trees change colors. They don't seem to want much.

NEXT TO TUT

You know, Tut, they were wrong
about us ending up the same.
Even now I admire you, how your hands
lay luminous and crossed, steamed
into the gold of many histories
and how your eyes remain unfired and cloudlike
as if held under the weightless custody of stars.
Where I come from people turn red
at thoughts of being buried naked.
For seven years Mrs. Knight rehearsed her death
ironing the pink gown she would one day die in
and my father took with him
two sacks of misery, big as bird nests
under each eye and no shame.
He wasn't very pretty, Tut, and
even though I've never seen it
I still believe in frail and simple death.
They tell me your people fooled
with acupuncture, boiled exuberant herbs
for migraine and madness, and how
you could charm the servant girls
couched on your harsh and beaded world,
chewing manna grits out of mosaic bowls.
But what have you ever done
for my uncle's bad heart, Tut? Where I come from
heaven is flying off to a better swap meet
and laziness is just another case
of the stray dog blues.
It must be hot having your eyes gilded shut,
your body bound in silks where the only
cool thing that moves in you
is someone else's breath. Where I am
there is plenty of space for the wind
to fit and swirl and every now and then
the sun swindles its way in,
lots of room for my ashes to take on flesh.

My mother is still scraping leftovers
for the cat. I smell Mamma Botta's pizza
and cheap tobacco spilling out of the pockets
of old men asleep on the porch,
and sometimes I wonder what mess
Johnny Mendez will be in when he gets here.
No, Tut, your bones were put together
someplace else. You will remain young and untarnished
because what we want to remember
is your bronzed and unripened face,
your blank and tender eyes. In the next
finger of wind we'll walk down my street
where I happen to be very important
because where I come from, Tut,
all the dead are vanished jewels.

CATHY SONG

THE TREE HOUSE

We knew it simply as the tree,
unremarkable, without a single flower,
without scent but the scent of itself.
Yellow was the color of the house we lived in,
one flight up the broken stairs,
the leaves began, layer upon layer
of green. Our son was the shadow,
dusk gathering under the leaves,
summer nights we breathed in the smell of it
green, the roots pulling water
in our sleep, deep within the dark green cellar.

The tree kept the house from poverty,
the limbs that held the porch in place
creaked like the screen door,
with each swing of the hammock.
We used to lie under the leaves and dream,
and what we dreamed with others
adorned the tree. The green afternoon
voice of the student soprano,
the five o'clock daughter of the piano keys,
and someone calling Jeremy home
unleashed a shower of leaves,

of coins, green and heart-shaped, into our hands.
Startled by a bird that flew one morning
into the house, we awoke to luxury,
the green years on Eustis Street,
summer and spring,
when we were in love,
still inventing our lives.
Missing the last bus from the square,

not even winter could make us feel
the poverty of the plywood chairs.
The sputtering of the gas stove
was a blue flame in the chilled branches,
smooth, shaven of leaves,
like the antlers of some gentle beast
stirring asleep beneath the snow.
The nights we walked home to the tree
and the tree was a web of stars.

THE WINDOW AND THE FIELD

There wasn't much on the island to speak of,
a red dirt road through canefields going nowhere.
Your father's life waiting for you.
In the evenings after work,
he polished his shoes.
She wasn't the girl in the polka-dot dress
you took for a spin.
What wasn't red dirt and canefields
was off-limits: her thin shoulders,
the lights from the pink hotel
distant as the surrounding reef
silently lit with shells.

Thirty years is a long time going back
for me, unborn, a quiet witness
to the pressed kiss she saved in a basement room.
Driving home,
you stalled under the stars.
The sea meant nothing to you.
It was instead the sky, an uncut road
through a field of blue.

Your father asked gently
how the time was spent.
You offered clean hands,

a pantomime of wings above the tablecloth.
The recital of nights
you taught yourself to fly
in an abandoned field.
He lifted his eyes
and then lowered them in grace.
He remained that way unconvinced
by the girl who would come to call him father,
by your maiden flight across the dreary plates.

You speak in lengths of decades,
polishing your shoes,
as if only yesterday you carried
a young bride up the steps of the family porch.
She remembers it differently.
Red dirt and clouds
and a red dog limping toward her.
She waved but you were already down the road,
spinning a reckless veil of dust.
It was four o'clock in the trees.
A river of heat shimmered through the canestalks.

I am a part of that mixed blessing:
a pinch of salt
thrown over a weary shoulder.
If you had looked in the rear view mirror,
you might have seen it: the white gloved hand
like a white flag waving.
The day she turned slowly toward the house,
you returned in a borrowed plane,
swooping low three times in a rush of air.
The laundry fluttered.
The chickens squawked for shelter.
She carried a black suitcase up the stairs,
unlatching the door with the word father,
a man who sat far back in his chair.
She unpinned her hat, peeled off her gloves,
splitting apart the white petals.

They lay on her lap like gardenias,
twin flowers,
one for each daughter she would give you.
One patient, the other pliant:
beside the window and the field,
a self already divided.

LITANY

She gave you the names of things,
each word, a candle
you held between yourself and the dark.
The litany of the alphabet
like a rosary before sleep.
Then the shadows on the wall
became familiar,
the storybook shape of elephants.

Mornings she took in laundry,
arms buried in suds,
her sleeves rolled up like a man.
She had no use for singing.
What she did, she did
because of you,
her last wish granted:
the midnight birth,
a boy without a breath that wasn't her own.

You were the center of her brisk movements,
the point between the porch and the tree,
the smallest insistence of color.
Your small frame, remote
as a sundial, was obedient
noon without shadow.
In a starched white shirt of silence,
you longed for a river:
a boy with a stick and a dog.

Beside the green water of the ditch,
the tall grass hid the white waxy flower.
The nights were cool and filled with its smell,
the nights you leaned out as if to test the wind,
scattering breadcrumbs,
a promise of wheat.
But the wind was never right.

What was it like
to lie down in the ditch,
your head on that hard pillow,
to hear the sound of the work
she made for herself,
the stubborn light of her window,
a burning hole she stitched in the night?

You were the one she called Andrew,
handsome and true,
the boy she called home to supper,
wiping his shoes
before a feast of fruit and flowers.
The one in the photograph
standing next to her,
winged-collar of an angel,
his hand on her sleeve,
tethered there
beside the straight-backed chair.

Guilt is a halo of silence,
the white clean shirt you wore.

You are the boy standing next to her,
the one who would never leave.

THE AGE OF REPTILES

The day you are born,
your brother swings himself
high into the air.
So high, in fact,
that the rope wobbles slack
in his fall back toward earth.
To an imaginary crew he yells,
"This is the captain speaking.
Turbulence! Fasten your seat belts!"
His hair, straight and brittle,
a magnet to static electricity
and linty knots, is still very yellow.
He thinks he is alone in the yard;
the world, for all he knows, is spring.

The day you are born,
your mother steps outside the house.
She is wearing a red sweater,
one that she wore all winter.
Since Valentine's, she has been watching
for signs, if this is the day
a child might take the long way home,
carrying between woolen gloves,
like a tin foiled pastry,
a homemade heart.
She herself is like a valentine,
a small red figure
waiting for a child to round the corner
and appear out of the white envelope of snow.

Some years later,
you are the stewardess
balancing a tray of teacups
as you make your way down the aisle,
the cracked sidewalk trimmed with marigolds.
Clouds glide past,
plump and complacent as cows.

You nod and smile at each dull face.
The flight is uneventful.
The pilot has gone to school.

You read his books,
listen to his radio.
Lying in your brother's room
you think you know him
by his absence, the cleft in the bed;
by the clues he left behind,
the different phases of boyhood
he devoured like comic books.
A timeline spans the length of his room.
The Age of Reptiles is the longest blue line.
Man's brief history
is less than an inch of time.
Long ago he explained it—
The Dawn of Man;
it still amazes you.
You think your own family is like that:
they appear together for a moment,
the time it takes to assemble
for a photograph,
to move toward one another.
But life is a long blue line.

The mornings he sat at the table,
his rare presence took on heroic consequences.
He ate in mythic portions:
a loaf of tuna sandwiches
stacked like a deck of cards
and a gallon of milk
would disappear under his arm
into the caverns of his room.
He'd be gone as if for days
only to reemerge, starved;
a fleet of freshly glued model airplanes—
Messerschmitts, Mustangs, and Spitfires—

drying under the lamp.
Across the hall, the rumpled
coughing of his sleep was oddly comforting.
The neutral hum of his humidifier
put the house to sleep.
You would know that sound anywhere
and the ancient smell of vapor rub
misting the rooms.

In your own time,
you entered the smooth traffic
of the household, the brief
congestion at breakfast.
The family moved in and out of the day
without collision, without
a hint of what the others dreamed.
The table was like the street at noon,
deserted but for a child
pedaling her way up the sidewalk;
her bicycle, a hand-me-down,
making a dilapidated sound.

The morning your mother stepped out
into early March, it was as if
to say goodbye to the boy in the swing
who had begun to trace his own life,
an invisible arc, away from her.
And you, where do you fit in,
born in the evening on that day in March.
You would forever want to call to them
to wait, to turn and wave
and leave open the gate.
But your brother would grow tired of the swing
and your mother, slightly chilled,
would turn to go inside.

It seems you've been looking out
one window, one moment all your life,

at the slant of roof and trees,
while everything around you evolved,
became something else.
The scissored hands of the kitchen clock
had snipped the days apart
and your brother had become
a picture on the piano.
But your lives never stopped overlapping
after all. Like the black and white movies
you both would watch together
where figures out of the past
one by one step forward to say goodbye,
he sleepwalks out of his room
and into your dream of a sad
but happy ending;
a refugee in his boyhood pajamas,
rubbing his eyes, standing at the door,
saying it's late.

Now the evenings are spent
walking the neighborhood haphazardly
in an attempt to shuffle the houses,
make them interchangeable;
so that when you come upon your own house
as if by accident, it will seem no different;
it will be with the equanimity of a stranger
looking in, seeing the room
at the top of the stairs,
a woman dozing in a spotless kitchen
where supper is being kept warm.
Before going in to take
your place at the table,
you think of all the families
you could have claimed as yours,
and you open the door
and walk into this one.

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MARIA FLOOK

THE SAPLING

Crickets slowed or increased
in warmth and plainness,
a pure seeking.
Milkweed, puffball, the king
dandelion and its slave, the sun.
All that fluff
until evening when silence ascended
like stinging, wings whirring
two high notes against the screen.
The house was new, its bricks
laid even like sensible words
spoken before children.
Letters arrived for my sisters—
praise from school teachers
and news of the boy
on tour in Korea.
My father returned late
to work in the garden
when the sun swelled
and lowered itself so gently
as if in injury.
I stood by his basket; the grass
steamed, the weeds stirred
as if still searching.
A hole was made
for the leafless sapling
that, nursed along, recovered
and grew on carelessly.
Its permanence assured, it opened out
obstructing window-views.
For years it grew,

the parlor dimmed, all other rooms
were overtaken.
All youth was blurred
and left exposed in winter.
It was the coldest shade,
its cunning ways confused the summer
light that never caught up to us
as we are now.
In that house, a spider's egg exploded
with secret force,
its large family, so many,
wandered every way
but always into darkness.

WENDY BARKER

THE NAVY BLUE CHAIR

Wraps quiet in its smooth chintz,
silent as a rabbit,
as the black dazzle of midnight.

Outside the kitchen a phoebe
sits on three eggs
as I rinse the omelet pan.

The chair's fabric
is slick as an egg, the chair
knows nothing of bloodshed.

Has no need for language.
Only—there is something
in the easy curve

of the firm high back
that might allow anything, anything
at all: hatching, feathering,

rising through dark air
with the lilt of a Mozart sonata,
the lift of a perfect soufflé.

After the dishes are finished
I want to sit down. If I sit
long enough in the blue chair

I may know when the phoebe's young
will crack through to the air,
when the summer storms will break—

when the clashing of flesh and beak,
the loud pounding of hard rain,
of hard flight,

will have to begin.

RED CHAIR AT THE PIANO RECITAL

A red chair under pecan trees
outside the glass door . . . .

In September the children's notes
were single and slow,
songs so simple we could barely
call them music.

But now the first-year students
color the walls
with "Blue Danube"s and "Green
Boogie"s, while the chair
asserts its red space
in the April sun.

The children's curved fingers
find the white and black notes
steadily, accurately.
The lap of the chair glows
flame over the lawn.

When the kids are finished
the piano teacher
plays just one piece for us,
a Brahams intermezzo,

and the music becomes all the chairs
that ever held us, all
the chairs that ever waited,

all the chairs we ever
had to leave
without saying goodbye

while the red metal chair
under the new leafing trees
sits red, red in the green garden.
Even after we've walked out the door
for punch and cake,
no one sits in the red chair

that strums its own
upright, unrusted ostinato
steady as oceans, a pulse
around which we move.

CHARLES BAXTER

MIDWESTERN POETICS

The unpromising meets the unexotic,
and we are home again, alone,
with this image of the possible:
these hills that anyone can climb,
the lowlands, reeds perched with red-wing
blackbirds, leading painlessly
to cemeteries and small towns
where voices are subdued and have no region.
A man paints enormous replicas
of Rembrandt's middle period on the sides
of barns. He is mad. He leaves.
Without elevations, hurricanes, or
earthquakes, without geological alarms,
we learn to count the angles
in the sky and to admire four-barrel carburetors
in the muscle cars that combine with roadside
trees in the six-pack dark of Saturday.
It's not that something has to happen.
A man writes a letter to himself
and excludes the absolute: he is four seasons,
paths in third-growth woods, nature
that is endlessly familiar.
He is a silo: he stores, he feeds.
No horsemen raging down the mountains
flying banners, no vipers, just this and that
that could be anywhere but happens to be here.
The children grow up calm: they learn
about psychotic tantrums like tornados.
They plan. There is time, and more time
and more time after that to learn to love
the mild gifts—these apple trees, these
sparrows—in this marriage with a woman
who knows you, but will not kiss you back.

JAMES McKEAN

HEADLONG

Why is it now,
as I near forty and my child
runs headlong on her legs,
that I remember Larry McMurray's '59
Ford station wagon I bought
one morning and wrecked that night,
the hood standing straight up
and as far back as the gas cap
a moonscape of dents and sprung doors?
My first full stop announced
with a bang, a glass-littered street,
and hours of sirens dying
all the way to Tacoma General.
Where was I going
eight times past Frisco Freeze?
I remember the rearview mirror gone,
and high on the windshield,
like a print in drypoint,
the faint likeness of my hair.
Sixteen, in love with wreckage,
I thought I'd never die,
right for once in a world as wrong
as the drunk who hit me,
his wife unconscious and bleeding
onto his lap. Wake up.
What am I thinking?
Will I tell my daughter this
when she outruns her legs?
Or that I drive to her each night
miles beneath the limit,
my vision gone, my hands tight
and wet all the way home
where I lock the door,

bandage her skinned knee,
tell her a story she doesn't believe:
how I once flew down streets,
too fast, lucky as a backseat dog asleep,
and wreckless all the wrong ways.

STUMP FARM

For my brother

A crop in perpetual failure,
you say, laughing all day beneath a sky
gray as hardpan. We've split firewood
until my truck groans in its springs,
and now we sit and drink and watch the sky
darken as a bruise darkens, the stumps
gone black on your two muddy acres.
A good idea you thought
until your wife left at night, the wolf
wild in her veins, her headlights
crazy in the trees that fall now
one by one around you. Stump farm—
pasture someday, a good fence,
maybe a single-wide towed in, blocked up,
and water if the pipes don't freeze.

She left what she couldn't move:
the garage you sleep in, your gift horse
that bit her once too often, bruises
rising in her arms like two-petalled flowers,
even your dumb anger no one sees,
that holds the riding crop at your side
when the horse swings backside out,
steel shoes flashing. It's as if
you can't break something inside you,
stubborn as stumps that will not budge
come pry-bar or peavy or weeks of fire,
come desperate late-night seedings of mud
for pasture rising green and even
come spring, come spring.

REYNOLDS PRICE

THREE SECRETS

I. JOSEPH

Now Joseph, being a man of principle, and not wishing to make a spectacle of Mary, decided to dismiss her secretly.
Matthew 1:19

That's way too strict a version of the truth.
The principle was—*I'd never seen her like,*
Not in fifty years (and I'd seen a few).
My first wife had died the previous winter;
And once we had her cold underground,
My boys gave skittish signs of dread—
The aged parent, unobligingly hale,
To stuff and josh through centuries more.
Without my knowledge, they set up a hunt—
Some well-fixed widow or crosseyed girl
Who might not gag at stringy hams,
The treacherous tool that let me down
More times than not those last years.
They came back dry and said as much—
"Take it from here; our hands are full."
"—Of the trade I taught you," I thought but didn't say
And turned back to minding my own cot and pots.
Still they'd set me off, and the itch gnawed steady.
So I made my own hunt—dignified, cunning,
Best foot forward—with no better luck;
Then resigned myself to space and peace
(A big, not entirely unwelcome surprise).
Toward spring, however, an old local girl
Moved back up here. She'd married well—
A Temple priest—and lived in the City

Till he keeled over one day, slaughtering doves.
I'd played games with her before she got grand
And wondered now what play was left.
None at all, not a skip—she let me know
On my first visit (and I'd washed my beard).
The daughter though—the blinding girl.
I hardly watched her serving our tea;
My eyes would skid off her face like ice
Or live wood-coals. She looked that rare.
Whatever her mother had had, long since
(Good eyes, straight teeth), whatever the priest—
All boiled in her and changed to skin
Rich as goat's cream, eyes
Deep enough to hold the world.
She never spoke. But as I left
Anne seized my arm and said "Protect her."
I thought she'd gone off her rocker in town;
Baffled, I bowed and scuttled out.
Protect her from what up here?—the odd snake.
But I dreamed about her the next three nights
And then went back to ask Anne's meaning.
She meant what happened, a marriage deal.
And though I faced a hail of jokes,
I kept my bargain and married the girl—
Even with a belly slung on her by then,
A wen gorging hour by hour on blood.
Why? Not principle. Not manly kindness
And—God knew then—not second sight
(The way I saw it, some City boy'd ruined her).
I was glad enough to take people's pity,
Nod my thanks when they said "bighearted."
My heart's big as yours, a small man's fist.
The principle was *her*—all skin and eyes,
Lank horsehair bound at her strong-stalked neck,
The covered promise of undreamed more.
My secret till now (and it scalds to tell)
Is the one fact no one's guessed at yet—
I saw her just once, the whole bare her.
Wracked in dry straw, sweating great clots
Of absolute dread, her bloody thighs

Swung boneless out and blue with agony
To make clear room for that huge head—
Her first live boy, a ten-pound wedge.
The ox-team bent down nearer than I.
   Years after, back home (the nine years left me),
I never begged more. A younger man
Might have barged through risk to claim that glory—
Even one short night, succeeded by her death.
Not I. I slept at a good arm's length.
Though in reach of her breath—the musk of milk—
Till I died, still stunned.

2. MARY

The angel said to her "The Holy Spirit will come over you, and the Highest Power will darken you."

Luke 1:35

   It did, no question.
My hands worked to save me;
The dark was so deep
They couldn't find my body.
My skirt had melted away
In the glare (I felt that much),
And the wind scorched my legs—
The scars are still there,
Though no one's seen them since Bethlehem.
Mother begged to see, any shred
Of proof for the cock-and-bull story
I had to tell—a girl
Flung down by the Last Resort,
His hot seed blown
Into her green womb: a country
Girl, never asked to write
So much as her name, now asked
To gouge it plain enough to read—
An ordinary name in the dome of creation.

I stood and wrote, apparently
Right—the word still echoes,
A million mouths, each instant
Each year. Who was I, fifteen,
To say flat No?
Twelve thousand days later—
Toothless, hunched, at his raw
Red feet—I knew my answer
And mouthed it toward him. I doubt
He heard; he was screaming by then.
So I've held it in, two thousand
Years, and see no cause to speak
It now.

3. JESUS

"There are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb. There are eunuchs made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven."
Matthew 19:12

I said as much to test their edge
And waited for the question *Which are you?*
—Sweaty silence. I'd lost them again
To the nearest sight: two amorous dogs
And a peg-legged girl. When would I learn?
I was not meant to be heard but seen,
The final emblem.
It was near the end;
I was all but hungry for the final round.
So I let it rest on the humming air
And turned toward blood, thick sheets of blood—
All I had.
The question waits though,
Three-pronged riddle any man must solve
For himself or choke—*Who cut my roots?*
The lines to power, and why, and so what?

My premise plainly was *Power is flesh.*
Man's power—woman's—maybe God's,
Flesh as it yokes with alien flesh
In single relays, bearing the charge
Till flesh burns out and is someway replaced.
   Me? I came here fully equipped,
All requisite organs, members, glands;
All ticking dimly at the human rate—
A fresh bud here, a wilting there,
Crisp hair and eighteen separate scents:
All triggered also by natural time.
At fourteen no boy anywhere near me
(Where we swam in the quarry) showed more than I—
A convex exhibit of Ready Boy,
The height of the climb, my splendid noon.
   All wasted, unspent? All slashed and hurled
In the rank dog's-bowl?
                              Never, no.
The loyal women who watched me nailed,
Hung high to drip, know I died intact—
A youngish man still fit to stamp
His face on countless scores of souls
As yet blank, dumb, in the waiting line.
Even soldiers flung up cheers
At my pelvic gear.
                              So yes, I chose;
It was not specified in my commission.
I made myself this dead-end road
I walked to the end, this low Skull Hill.
I vowed it at twelve when my fork took life,
And twenty-one years I kept the vow
With no more ease than a healthy stallion
Tethered in a field of fragrant mares.
More nights and dawns than any friend knew,
I gnawed the heel of my hard right hand
To purple pulp to balk my yen
To know the common sweetness of skin.
   Why? I knew I'd need clear gaze,

No flickering others at the rim of sight,
No colored glass between me and day.
I was the prism, sole translator
Of this whole world that poured through me
Toward God's own mind—the stroke of dark,
Light, jackal-crunch of teeth in bone,
Human eyes so swamped by pain
I'd have howled and run except for the choice.
Every conscious moment, I stopped my arm
On the near edge of touch. Healing, scourging,
Anointing, yes; never the melding
That brings frank joy, knowledge and joy—
Likewise shackles, blinders, gags.
That was the cost. *I was always free.*
I could speak any syllable that creased my mind
(No family glares)—sleep in the dirt
Where I happened to tire—raise a cold corpse
Without its permission and then walk out.
Few ever saw me twice, except the twelve pupils.
They were close-by daily, huddled close at night;
But they were who I touched least of all—
Once when I tapped them to follow me;
Second, that last time as they sat bolting
Down broiled perch to numb their betrayal
And I stepped through the shut door—live!
They had to touch me to prove their fear.
He meant all he said. This country eunuch
With a two-edged tongue, a babymaker
In mint condition (never unwrapped),
This silvery bore died in the pain
That splits black granite in the hearts of hills
And stands *here now, skin pierced but closing—*
Reach here in the side, know a new brand of flesh.
I managed, just, to bear their touch—
One by one, eleven in line;
And then the three women, diehard loyals
From the earliest days. I thought I'd shrink,
That the flesh itself would flee their hands

As it always had. But no, it held
In place for all three (Magdalen last).
And as they rushed out to scrounge me a bowl,
Salvage some scraps—I must be starved—
I suddenly saw a changed new world,
Sight strange to me as my face to this room,
What my vow had forbade my knowing till now.
Each particle linked, perpetual chain:
Yoking, binding, bonding in glee
These fourteen before me, old companions,
Now newly born, more welcome than rain—
Bumping and jostling to dry my hair,
Guiding my elbow on to the bench
They'd cleared to bear me, crouching round,
Hand joined to hand at the white core of space
Where they'd been from the start,
The lovely tread of lean and hold
—Which I knew in an instant I now must flee.
I wept hot tears to learn so late.

COMMENT

BRIEF REVIEWS

The Long Approach, by Maxine Kumin. Viking. $14.95.

Aside from her poetry, Maxine Kumin has published a book of short stories and four novels. In her eighth collection of poems one notes her ability to fashion compact scenes which gesture towards a larger story in the background. At her best she manages to blend a poet's compression with a fiction writer's narrative verve. It is in the opening sequence of family pieces that these talents are most strikingly combined. She remembers her father turning from his monthly quarrel with his wife over the department store bills to preside at the dinner table:

> His anger smells like dinner parties
> like trays of frothy daiquiris.
> Against the pre-World-War-Two prime
> standing ribs his carving knife
> flashes a little drunkenly.

Or she remembers cleaning out her dead mother's bureau drawers:

> Under the petticoats, bedjackets, corsets,
> under the unfinished knitting that crossed
> continents with her, an affable animal,
> I come on a hatbox of type-O any-hair,
> heavy braids that have lain fifty years in this oval.
> Between them, my mother's mother's calling card
> engraved on brittle ivory velum . . . .

Such deft observations remain memorable for the reader, too. My favorite among such poems is "Atlantic City 1939," in which the poet recalls being taken to the resort to convalesce from whooping cough by her mother and her "courtesy uncle." The child views censoriously the adults' flirtations; and the memories end with this:

Pink with ardor, not knowing why,
I longed for one of them to die
that slow September by the sea.
He fell on the beach at Normandy.
I never heard her say his name
again without a flush of shame
for my complicity.

Here the naively heavy rhythms and rhymes capture convincingly both the melodramatic hatred and the remorse that children are capable of.

Kumin is best known, probably, for her poems on rural life, and this volume adds to her canon several appealing pieces about the New Hampshire farm she lives on. Sometimes, it is true, she lapses into a forced jauntiness in her celebrations of nature—as when a newborn foal's effort to stand is described as "cakewalk cocky with the whole mess / of birth and rebirth and the strut of the season." But one appreciates her quieter precisions: the "black moth-eaten laprobe fur" of a hibernating bear, or the moose "homespun / with leafy horns like lichen made of bone."

All this can be summed up by saying that Kumin writes as well as ever in her customary modes. There are a number of poems, though, in this new book which are for her something of a departure. In these, her publishers tell us, she "boldly ventures into public terrain." The results in such cases are not as laudable as the public-spirited impulse behind them. Kumin is certainly not unique in producing poems on public themes which seem inadequate to their occasions. The media have made us exhaustively conversant with pollution, racism, carnage in the Middle East, famine in Africa, and the threat of nuclear extinction. Unless poems on such subjects have something unusually fresh to say our response is likely to be one of numb recognition and not much more. In a poem about nuclear war Robert Lowell wrote, "We have talked our extinction to death." That was twenty-five years ago, and even then he was right.

Perhaps in order to give these bewildering global agonies some personal urgency, Kumin has chosen to put herself at the center of these poems. I don't think this egocentric strategy always works the way I suppose she means it to. Somehow it distracts us from the issues more than it illuminates them for us. There is the poet, always in the midst, getting upset by the TV news or feeling edgy while traveling between Egypt and Israel. The unfortunate (and surely unintentional) implication is that because this poet is bothered by the news, we should be. We *should* be; but not for that reason. It may not be easy to say something charged and memorable about these matters while keeping the self out of the picture, but a poem like Richard Wilbur's "Advice to a Prophet" shows that it can be done. If Kumin wishes to venture into public terrain, perhaps her voice, which is essentially private, needs to adjust itself to the new and very different demands she is now placing on it. This will no doubt take some time. It can be assumed, at any rate, that a poet of her intelligence stands an even chance of solving the problems involved.

Leaning Forward, by Grace Paley. Granite Press. $8.95.

I doubt that Grace Paley's reputation as a poet will supersede her renown as a writer of short fiction. Still, it is good to have this selection of the poetry she has been writing, as Jane Cooper says in an Afterword, "before, during, and after writing her stories." Without being momentous, this is perky, likable work, recognizably in the Paley voice. Some of the tactics that work well in her stories do not work so well in the more constrained dimensions of verse. Effects of spontaneity, of improvisation, sometimes keep the manner fresh at the expense of the material, and we have what seem like notebook jottings instead of fully realized poems. The following untitled piece, quoted *in toto*, is an example of this slighter work:

> I don't think
> the rain will end
> today   this is
> because I come
> from another
> country

I don't get much out of this, and I doubt there is much to get.

On the other hand, I am impressed by some of the poems in which a deeper import seems to lurk behind the impromptu observation. Paley's best work is often reminiscent of the shorter poems of William Carlos Williams, and I imagine he would have enjoyed the exuberance and clear rendering of "psalm":

their shoes are stuccoed with sawdust and blood
the two young butchers walk singing together on ninth avenue
the sun is out because it is the lunch hour
they kick the melting snow and splash into deep puddles
then they embrace one another in the cold air
for water and singing may wash away the blood of the lamb

I would still prefer to introduce an inquiring reader to Paley by way of her stories, but a poem like this one, or "On Mother's Day," or "My Father at 89," can be recommended without any caveats. As with Williams, Paley's vitality and affectionate vignettes are often diverting enough to make us overlook many of the self-restrictions to which a minimalist style commits a poet.

A Fraction of Darkness, by Linda Pastan. Norton. $12.95 cloth; $6.95 paper.

Linda Pastan's poems are easy to like; and this is at least partly because they are easy to read. In fact it is possible to read her poems *too* quickly; for her simplicity and directness are the result of calculation and effort. The unobtrusive craft may only become evident in a second or third reading, adding new dimensions to one's initial pleasure in these unpretentious lyrics.

While each poem in this book is self-sufficient, they gather force when read in sequence. I would not have thought that so many changes could still be rung effectively on images of light and dark, which here, as so often elsewhere, stand for life and death. Pastan puts a personal stamp on this potentially hackneyed imagery. Her success depends chiefly, I think, on her refusal to present light and dark, existence and mortality, in crude opposition. The poems record what, if we are lucky, experience teaches: that life and death are interleaved, and that not much can be understood of either without having in mind the other.

Focused attentively on the moment, the poet is persistently aware of what lies before and after. In "At the Still Point," with her fingers "caught / between the pages of the book," she watches the slow coming of spring, deftly moving from objective description to metaphor and back again:

What was lost in winter
remains lost. But
once again the wind flips
the pages of the book
like surf, delicately
backwards, and we start again
at the first chapter,
where just at the edge of sight
an ambiguous bee hangs
on the blossoms,
its ancient sting
almost forgotten.

Almost, but never quite. The sting is felt more sharply in a number of poems about illness—cancer in particular—and death, in which she manages to avoid being either grandiose or banal. "Waiting Room" is a fine example of Pastan's steady, resolved tone in such pieces. It begins with the poet in line for a bus, "behind a woman / with the same look / my father wore for weeks, / waiting to die." A catalogue follows of all the moments of our lives spent waiting, whether in supermarkets or in doctors' offices. It ends with an effective synthesizing image:

. . . At home
waiting to grow up
I used to lean
against the sundial
my father built,
and the sun threw
its knife-edged
shadow down
cutting across
the knotted years.

Although it works well here and elsewhere for her, I found myself wishing that Pastan would not rely so frequently on two- or three-stress lines. A rhythmic sameness makes itself felt by the time one gets to the end of the book, and, as if to prove the point, a very fine sestina on the last page, "Shadows," shows how well Pastan can handle longer lines and traditional structures when she chooses. Couldn't she have chosen to a little more often?

Saints & Strangers, by Andrew Hudgins. Houghton Mifflin. $13.95 cloth; $6.95 paper.

There is more than a fraction of darkness served up in Andrew Hudgins's first book, and it is not, as it is for Linda Pastan, the darkness of mortality. More sensationally, it is the darkness of the corrupted will, of human evil. Hudgins grew up in Alabama, and his themes and outlook could be conveniently labeled Southern Gothic. He is preoccupied with violence and the grotesque, and like other Southern writers such as Faulkner, O'Connor, and Warren, he approaches his disquieting material from a perspective that is basically theological. Without searching far, he finds evidence of the Fall.

However serious an artist's intentions, grotesque subjects pose esthetic demands which are hard to meet. Hudgins writes about the bodies of rape victims found in the woods, about adult idiots being taken by a normal boy for a walk, about two murderesses holding hands in a women's prison yard, about hunters butchering a doe by night after hanging the carcass on a child's swing-set. (This last, I must admit, led me to lay the book aside for a time.) Of course, a reader's attention may be immediately riveted by such topics, but the fascination is likely to be shortlived. We are quick to put such things out of mind not merely from squeamishness but from a sense that they are not relevant to the lives most of us lead. We are probably wrong about this. But it takes an accomplished artist to overcome our natural resistance to a view of human nature which discerns in the most extreme moral distortions a kinship with our own more subtle ones. This perception, which is what theologians used to call "conviction of sin," is now most often found in Southern writers—perhaps because the culture of that region, more than any other, is still imbued with Biblical religion. I do not envy Hudgins the problems he faces in finding an audience. The people who would understand his preoccupations best are likely to read revivalist tracts rather than poetry; Yuppies, on the other hand, won't have a clue as to what lies behind all this extravagant morbidity.

But congratulations are more in order than condolences. Hudgins usually avoids the pitfalls offered by his harrowing material; atrocious details are placed in moral and psychological contexts which give the poems something more than shock value. "The Choice the Driver Makes" is not as showy as some of the pieces already alluded to, but it is a good example of Hudgins's ethical penetration and his control of tone. On a rainy night a drunk driver veers deliberately at the speaker, who has been walking at the roadside, "invisible / until the harsh lights choose me out of night." In imminent peril,

> For a long moment I stand judging them
> almost convinced they'll swerve away, then leap
> full-length into wet grass, wholeheartedly,
> and cannot tell what choice the driver makes.

It is unusual to find words like "choice," "judging," and "wholeheartedly" given such resonance.

Hudgins offers more variety than I have so far suggested. He has a histrionic flair, and some of his longer, more elaborate poems are dramatic monologues. "Sidney Lanier in Montgomery: August 1866," and "Zelda Sayre in Montgomery: 1942" exploit the full potential of their form. The first goes beyond projecting its title character to picture the decadence and fragmentation of the defeated South. The second creates a believable voice for Scott Fitzgerald's wife in her later, institutionalized days. Without resorting to any of the clichés associated with mental illness, it shows how, to one vulnerable sensibility, the world could become a pageant of unrelieved pain. The title sequence of monologues, "Saints and Strangers," is even better. The speaker here is the daughter of a revivalist preacher. She chronicles moments of her stern upbringing, her revolt against her father and her eventual reconciliation with him in his last years. There is a surprising amount of humor leavening the pathos of these memories. (She recalls, for instance, her boyfriend singing "Amazing Grace" in the voice of Donald Duck.) Given the situations, both the speaker and her father could in the hands of a lesser writer have become caricatures. As it is, the poems achieve a depth of characterization which is as rare as the lack of condescension with which they treat fundamentalist religion. All in all, this a fine first book.

The Triumph of Achilles, by Louise Glück. Ecco Press. $13.50.

Louise Glück is a very considerable poet; but heavens, isn't she grim! Charm is not her stock in trade; she is not out to be ingratiating. The female speaker in the first poem here, "Mock Orange," hates the eponymous flowers, she says, "as I hate sex." The male speaker in the last poem, "Horse," thinks his wife loves the animal better than she does him: "What does the horse give you / that I cannot give you?" he asks. People don't, in Glück's view, have a very good time of it. It might be easier to dismiss her message if she were a glib cynic; but she's disquietingly more than that: someone who has seen all the way to the bottom, and consequently has no illusions. It is not only what she says, but the way she says it, that is forbidding. The word "stark" comes up often in discussions of her style. It may be more illuminating to say that it is classically severe; some of her poems, like those of H.D., are reminiscent of Greek fragments, both in their elegance and their jaggedness. People who like their poems well-furnished will find Glück's austere. There is little description, and a good deal of uncomfortable pronouncement. Sometimes (as also happens with H.D.) Glück's manner becomes so stylized that we are likely to resist it. Addresses to Greek gods were not carried off by H.D. altogether without embarrassment, and Glück may have arrived too late in history to begin "The Reproach" like this:

> You have betrayed me, Eros.
> You have sent me
> my true love.
>
> On a high hill you made
> his clear gaze;
> my heart was not
> so hard as your arrow.

This is trying too hard to return to the roots of Western poetry, and it rings false.

Having said this, it must also be said that Glück's successes, in which her style is beautifully gauged to match her deeper insights, well outnumber her failures. I was particularly struck by her treatments of dominance, of power, which she sees as emotionally barren and morally bankrupt. The title poem exposes the emptiness of Achilles's triumph over the Trojans after the death of Patroclus. Though semidivine, the hero's life has lost all meaning with the loss of his friend:

> In his tent, Achilles
> grieved with his whole being
> and the gods saw
>
> he was a man already dead, a victim
> of the part that loved,
> the part that was mortal.

In "Liberation" a hunter and a rabbit stare hypnotized at one another, and the hunter realizes that in this confrontation his own eyes "have to be blank / because it is impossible / to kill and question at the same time." Identifying with his victim, he blinks ("the shutter snapped") and

> the rabbit went free. He flew
> through the empty forest
>
> that part of me
> that was the victim.
> Only victims have a destiny.
>
> And the hunter, who believed
> whatever struggles
> begs to be torn apart:
>
> that part is paralyzed.

This paradox of power as impotent recalls Simone Weil's great essay, "The *Iliad*: A Poem of Force," or, for that matter, much of our great tragic drama from *The Trojan Women* on. This, so unlike versified editorializing, is the kind of anti-war poetry which touches and endures. Some other fine, remorselessly honest poems are "Summer," "Hawk's Shadow," "Elms," "Legend," and "Morning." However one may hanker after charm, wisdom is a rarer commodity, and Glück has it to offer in an uncompromising fashion few of her contemporaries can match. If her manner is at times attenuated, it is never shoddy, and that, in these days, is a distinction.

Alternate Means of Transport, by Cynthia Macdonald. Alfred A. Knopf. $14.95 cloth; $7.95 paper.

Surrealism is nowadays a label applied promiscuously to anything offbeat; it might do well enough for Cynthia Macdonald's poems. Certainly the world of this book is not that of our ordinary experience. The beginning of "Wedding Banns: January 1980" is characteristic:

> Jack is polishing his black T-bird, new and shiny as a bullet.
> I drive by in a cart, which suits me

To a T in chain mail, that silver second skin. The cart, pulled
By a bullock, draws me
To the well where pales of water
Bleach the landscape to the blacks and greys
Of a Chinese scroll—my cart is my heart—my suit.
Poker-playing suitors choose strip, then
Fence, their fire tools crossed swords . . . .

And so on. A poem by Macdonald tends to be this sort of whimsical phantasmagoria, spun out (often at undue length) by word-antics and welters of imagery. Readers will soon concede that she outdoes even Richard Howard as a punster, but may wonder if these poems have much to offer beneath their garish verbal surfaces. A style so relentlessly bent on parading the writer's ingenuity can impede poetry from fulfilling certain other aims—such as telling us things we didn't know, or reminding us of things we should never have forgotten. Macdonald's playful cleverness can amuse (I cracked a smile at "Truth has been concealed, like 15th-century meat / Rotting under its fabric of spices"), but it cloys in large quantities.

In a few poems which are structured and animated by something more than free association, we glimpse a different, more substantial art. "Letter to Richard from Budapest," an absorbing epistolary travelogue, and "Two Brothers in a Field of Absence," a bizarre sexual fable, leave a profounder impression than most of the rest, but they are lonely instances. The question is not whether the poet has ability but whether she can, with her chosen vehicle, effectively express it. To adopt a bit of her manner, I must say that in reading *Alternate Means of Transport* I was often irritated, occasionally diverted, but never once transported. I suspect that on these roads the old mimetic jalopy, while decidedly less flashy, is more likely to get us to where we want to go, and maybe to places even more interesting than that.

Orrery, by Richard Kenney. Atheneum. $17.50 cloth; $10.95 paper.

An orrery, in case like me you didn't know, is a mechanical model of the solar system (named for Charles Boyle [1676–1731], fourth Earl of Orrery, for whom the first such instrument was made). Those who have spoken of the 18th-century's concept of a clockwork universe could easily find their emblem in a mechanism like the one pictured on Kenney's cover: with its ivory planets and moons manipulated by a celestial host of brazen gears, this is clockwork whirring toward apotheosis. As a cosmic model it may variously strike us as quaint, pathetically pretty, or intimidating. One can imagine William Blake going after it with a sledgehammer.

The device represents an unusually intricate effort on the part of men to keep track of time and to locate themselves in space by replicating the planetary motions. Kenney's book is not about an orrery, but is in theme and structure a literary analogy of it. In its ambitious speculative cosmology it bears comparison with Sir John Davies's *Orchestra* (1596), in which the dance provides an image of universal order, applying alike to terrestrial nature, to human society, and outwardly and upwardly to the circlings of the spheres. All this may suggest that Kenney is indulging in preoccupations that are rarefied and archaic. Undoubtedly there is an element of finical contrivance in what he has done which will leave some readers cold. But his poetry, while highly intellectualized, is more spirited, less bookish than one might imagine from this initial description.

His difficult task, in which in large measure he succeeds, is to humanize the clockwork. Neither the author nor his readers will care to be caught in the fine teeth of those gears; the mechanism is only valuable if it points us toward the larger motions it enacts in miniature. Taking hints from this function, Kenney's poetic orreries explore the relations of memory and time. "Apples," the central sequence of the book and its longest part, is a narrative composed of lyric segments in which memory moves backward and forward in time (which itself does not stand still) to evoke life on an apple farm in New England. It is fascinating to watch how Kenney combines his mechanistic model with his pastoral scenes so airily, without appearing to violate their organic integrity. Rather as Sir Thomas Browne saw quincunxes wherever he looked, so Kenney sees his orreries in and through the appearances of nature and the activities of man. The scheme of the book and his own sensitive, probing style permit him to draw contemplative significance from necessary chores: cleaning a chimney, harvesting fruit, operating an apple press, repairing a roof. His vocabulary is wide and precise and gives his poetry a highly distinctive firmness of texture. Some lines from "November" may give some sense of this:

> I watch the earth swing north. The cirrus race
> of atmosphere is mirrored here in gooseflesh skin;

the squint sun veers low and cooling, candles
distant snowclouds, slips the lake, the sky collapsing
after it, to embers, stars—
                                        Dark. The lapse
of light is longer now; December soon.
A struck match whips and frays, a tiny windsock
in these drafty rooms . . . .

It's masterly: the embers of the sunset fade only to be rekindled both above (as the stars) and below (the struck match). This is typical of Kenney's success in imaginatively relating the elements of his cosmos; and by disclosing such affinities he expands the reader's consciousness in a unique fashion. I do think the sequence "Apples" is longer than it need have been: The notion of seasonal cycles might have been suggested more economically, with fewer weather reports, however polished they may be in the writing. But the introductory poem "Hours," with its hourglass-shaped stanzas, is an extraordinary melding of metaphysical speculation with natural description, and it, together with the many strong passages that follow, sustains admiration. This is not easy poetry, but it is so sure and resourceful in its craft that it amply repays the concentrated attention it requires.

The New World: An Epic Poem, by Frederick Turner. Princeton University Press. $26.00 cloth; $9.95 paper.

Subtitled "an epic poem," this narrative takes place in the sadly altered United States of four hundred years in the future. It is not a time or place anyone would care to be part of. Government as we know it has collapsed, and society is in some areas anarchistic, in others semi-feudal. People live on solar- and wind-powered farms, waging war on horseback, wearing "resinite armor" and wielding lasers and swords. It's curious how old-fashioned the future is made to sound. Women and blacks especially will find Turner's conception more retrograde than futuristic. His new world is one in which women accept in marriage men who kill wild boars for them. It is also one in which an oracle called Kingfish holds court in the ruins of the New York subway system, uttering pseudo-profundities in a language like that of his namesake in *Amos 'n' Andy*: "Love de game, boy," he tells the hero, a youth even more vapid than Luke Skywalker. "De flesh be de life / ob de spirit, an' de spirit be all a game." Four hundred years, evidently, haven't brought philosophy forward very much.

Turner's plot is spasmodic, and his characters, who are meant to recall the heroic scale of figures in epic and myth, have rather the glaring unreality of people in Robinson Jeffers. What really makes *The New World* hard going, though, is the verse. Reading it is like slogging through quicksand. For long stretches it is barely distinguishable from prose, and it features throughout some of the most ill-considered enjambments lately seen in print. Here is part of a typically inert battle scene:

> And so the lances struck, and flexed, and split,
> flinging their shining splinters in the sky,
> and each knight kept his seat, and drew his sword,
> and turned upon his enemy, and charged;
> but Gared bled now from a shoulder wound
> and Gramoflanz carried a lance point in
> his thigh, and as he fought he moaned aloud.

There may be a certain mandarin pleasure in identifying the *topoi* Turner has so freely helped himself to. Oh yes, we say, there's that speech from *The Battle of Maldon*, or whatever. But the use made of these nuggets is so facile that his adaptations seem more a travesty of their grand originals than a tribute to them. In the twenty-fourth century, Turner tells us, "the old distinction between art and technology's gone, / and so too that between poems and advertisements." That a university press should have published this hapless farrago will be taken by some as a sign that such esthetic confusions are already far advanced. Meanwhile Homer, Virgil, and Milton continue to await further company on the upper slopes of Parnassus. It must be getting lonesome after all these centuries—and never yet a chance for a game of bridge.

ROBERT B. SHAW

CONTRIBUTORS

DAVID WAGONER's most recent book of poems, his fourteenth, is *First Light* (Atlantic-Little, Brown). He teaches at the University of Washington, where he edits *Poetry Northwest*. Last year he won the Charles Angoff Poetry Prize from *The Literary Review*.

GAIL MAZUR* has contributed to *The Hudson Review*, *The New Republic*, *Shenandoah*, and several other journals. Her second book, *The Pose of Happiness*, will be published next month. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she directs the Blacksmith House Poetry Reading Series.

JON VEINBERG* holds degrees in psychology and creative writing and is a mental health counselor in Fresno. In 1984 he was awarded an N.E.A. fellowship.

CATHY SONG* studied at Wellesley and Boston University. In 1983, her first book, *Picture Bride*, was published in the Yale Younger Poets series and was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award.

MARIA FLOOK's book of poems, *Reckless Wedding*, received the Great Lakes Colleges Association New Writers Award in 1983. She teaches at the University of North Carolina, in Asheville.

WENDY BARKER is an assistant professor of English at the University of Texas at San Antonio, where she teaches American literature and creative writing and directs the poetry reading series. Her book-length study of metaphor in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, *Lunacy of Light*, is forthcoming from Southern Illinois University Press.

CHARLES BAXTER has published two collections of short stories, *Through the Safety Net* (Viking, 1985) and *Harmony of the World* (Missouri, 1984), as well as fiction and poetry in *The Atlantic*, *Poetry Northwest*, *TriQuarterly*, and other magazines. Last year he had a Guggenheim Fellowship.

JAMES MC KEAN's first volume of poems, tentatively titled *Headlong*, is scheduled for publication next spring by the University of Utah Press. He lives in Oakland, California.

REYNOLDS PRICE will publish his sixth novel, *Kate Vaiden*, in June. He has also recently completed a trilogy of plays, called *New Music*. He teaches at Duke.

ROBERT B. SHAW, a frequent contributor of poetry and criticism to these pages, teaches English at Mount Holyoke College.

* First appearance in *Poetry*.

NEWS NOTES

In September, Robert Penn Warren will assume the title Poet Laureate, Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress. He is the first person in the United States to hold the official designation "poet laureate." That title was authorized and, in effect, added to that of "consultant in poetry," by Public Law 99–194.

The Librarian of Congress appoints the Laureate/Consultant, who advises the Library on its public literary programs, on the acquisition of literary material, and on new poets to be recorded for the Library's archives. In addition, Mr. Warren will deliver a lecture and public reading during the year and be available, with the approval of the Librarian, for service to other government agencies for particular ceremonial occasions, to the extent possible.

The Consultant's position was established in 1936 when Archer M. Huntington provided an endowment "for maintenance of a chair of Poetry of the English Language in the Library of Congress." Joseph Auslander was the first Consultant (1937–41); his successors include Allen Tate, Mr. Warren (in 1944–45), Louise Bogan, Karl Shapiro, Robert Lowell, Léonie Adams, Elizabeth Bishop, Conrad Aiken, William Carlos Williams (appointed but did not serve), Randall Jarrell, Robert Frost, Richard Eberhart, Louis Untermeyer, Howard Nemerov, Reed Whittemore, Stephen Spender, James Dickey, William Jay Smith, William Stafford, Josephine Jacobsen, Daniel Hoffman, Stanley Kunitz, Robert Hayden, William Meredith, Maxine Kumin, Anthony Hecht, Robert Fitzgerald (appointed but did not serve), and Gwendolyn Brooks.

BOOKS RECEIVED

VERSE

Bindweed, by Christianne Balk. Collier Macmillan. $13.95 cloth; $7.95 paper.

View from the Gazebo, by Marianne Boruch. Wesleyan University Press. $14.50 cloth; $7.95 paper.

A to Z: 26 Sermonettes, by James Broughton. Syzygy Press (Mill Valley, CA). $3.00.

Collected Poems, by Basil Bunting. Moyer Bell Limited (Mt. Kisco, NY). $19.95 cloth; $12.95 paper.

Salt, by Duncan Bush. Poetry Wales. Distrib. by Dufour Editions. $8.95.

Her Magnificent Body: New and Selected Poems, by Janine Canan. ManRoot (South San Francisco). $8.50.

The Selected Poetry of Hayden Carruth. Collier Macmillan. $18.95 cloth; $10.95 paper.

Source, by Fred Chappell. Louisiana State University Press. $13.95 cloth; $6.95 paper.

Robin Hood in the Dark Ages, by Kelvin Corcoran. Permanet Press (London). $4.95.

Home State, by Dave Etter. Spoon River Poetry Press (Peoria). $4.95.

Live at the Silver Dollar, by Dave Etter. Spoon River Poetry Press. $5.95.

Fifteen to Infinity, by Ruth Fainlight. Carnegie-Mellon University Press. Distrib. by Harper & Row. $6.95.

I Am Phoenix: Poems for Two Voices, by Paul Fleischman. Harper & Row. $11.50.

Seals in the Inner Harbor, by Brendan Galvin. Carnegie-Mellon University Press. Distrib. by Harper & Row. $14.95 cloth; $6.95 paper.

An Artist's Album, by M. B. Goffstein. Harper & Row. $11.95.

The Book of Games, by Louis Hammer. Jazz Press/Sachem Press. $11.95 cloth; $6.95 paper.

Mutatis Mutandis: 27 Voices, by William Harmon. Wesleyen University Press. $16.00 cloth; $8.95 paper.

The Silence Afterwards, by Rolf Jacobsen. Tr. and ed. by Roger Greenwald. Bi-lingual text. Princeton University Press. $26.50 cloth; $9.95 paper.

The Oxford Book of Short Poems, ed. by P. J. Kavanagh and James Michie. Oxford University Press. $19.95.

On the Edge, by Kenneth Koch. Viking Penguin. $18.95 cloth; $8.95 paper.

Something Sleeping in the Hall, by Karla Kushkin. Harper & Row. $8.95.

Poems for Lost and Un-lost Boys, by Michael Lassell. Amelia (Bakersfield, CA). $7.95.

Inside Diameter: The France Poems, by Clarence Jamor. Permanent Press. $4.95.

Eroding Witness, by Nathaniel Mackey. University of Illinois Press. $8.95.

The Caves of Love, by Jerome Mazzaro. Jazz Press (Aptos, CA). $6.95.

Monkey's Raincoat: Linked Poetry of the Bashō School and Haiku Selections, tr. by Lenore Mayhew. Bi-lingual text. Charles E. Tuttle Company. $8.95.

Witching on Hardscrabble, by Walter McDonald. Spoon River Poetry Press. $3.95.

The Storm and Other Things, by Eugenio Montale. Tr. by William Arrowsmith. Bilingual text. W. W. Norton. $14.95 cloth; $6.95 paper.

The Coldest Year of Grace, by Giovanni Raboni. Tr. by Stuart Friebert and Binio Rossi. Wesleyan University Press. $17.00 cloth; $8.95 paper.

Skevington's Daughter, by Oliver Reynolds. Faber and Faber. $17.95 cloth; $7.95 paper.

The Dragon's Sceptre, by Patricia Shelton. Sarasvati. Distrib. by Charles E. Tuttle. $7.95.

Love Song to the One I Love, by Ravi Singh. White Lion Press (New York City). No price listed.

Stories About Wooden Keyboards, by Kendrick Smithyman. Auckland University Press/Oxford University Press. $11.95.

Collected Poems, by Stephen Spender. Random House. $19.95.

Nightblind, by Pamela Stewart. Raccoon Books (Memphis, TN). $8.95.

Renaming the Streets, by John Stone. Louisiana State University Press. $13.95 cloth; $6.95 paper.

Tagore's Eleven: Ten Poems and One Song of Rabindranath Tagore. Tr. by Shafi Ahmed. Oaktown Publications (London). £4.00.

The Flying Change, by Henry Taylor. Louisiana State University Press. No price listed.

Rod and Lightning, by Carroll F. Terrell. National Poetry Foundation (Orono, ME). $8.95 cloth; $5.00 paper.

Classical Arabic Poetry: 162 Poems from Imrulkais to Ma'arri, ed. by Charles Greville Tuetey. Routledge & Kegan Paul. $36.00.

The Shadow of Wings, by Marine Robert Warden. Seven Buffaloes Press (Big Timber, MT). $4.00.

PROSE

Keats and Hellenism: An Essay, by Martin Aske. Cambridge University Press. $32.50.

Thresholds: Studies in the Romantic Experience, by Albert Cook. University of Wisconsin Press. $37.50.

The Daring Muse: Augustan Poetry Reconsidered, by Margaret Anne Doody. Cambridge University Press. $44.50 cloth; $12.95 paper.

Women's Voices from Latin America: Interviews with Six Contemporary Authors, by Evelyn Picon Garfield. Wayne State University Press. $21.50.

American Poets, 1880-1945: First Series, ed. by Peter Quartermain. Gale Research Company. $88.00.

The Self as Mind: Vision and Identity in Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats, by Charles J. Rzepka. Harvard University Press. $22.50.

The Influence of French Symbolism on Modern American Poetry, by René Taupin. Tr. by William Pratt and Anne Rich Pratt. AMS Press. $45.00.

VERSE AND PROSE COMBINED

Earth That Sings: On the Poetry of Andrew Glaze, by William Doreski. Ford-Brown (Houston). $9.95.

Romaji Diary and Sad Toys, by Takuboku Ishikawa. Tr. by Sanford Goldstein and Seishi Shinoda. Charles E. Tuttle. $8.95.

Next-to-Last-Things: New Poems and Essays, by Stanley Kunitz. Atlantic Monthly Press. $17.95.

Vergin' Mary and Madonna, by Lyn Lifshin and Belinda Subraman. Vergin' Press (El Paso, TX). $4.50.

From This Condensery: The Complete Writing of Lorine Niedecker, ed. by Robert J. Bertholf. The Jargon Society. $30.00.

There Lies a Fair Land: An Anthology of Norwegian-American Writing, ed. by John Solensten. New Rivers Press (St. Paul). $7.50.

Dissolve to Island: On the Poetry of John Logan, ed. by Michael Waters. Ford-Brown. $9.95.

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Poetry's April 1978 issue featured the first publication of Maxine Kumin's "In April, in Princeton" and "Archaeology of a Marriage" and David Wagoner's "Crossing a River," "Seeing Things," and "Burial Song."

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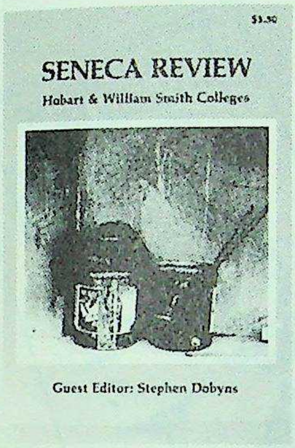
Vol. XV, No. 2



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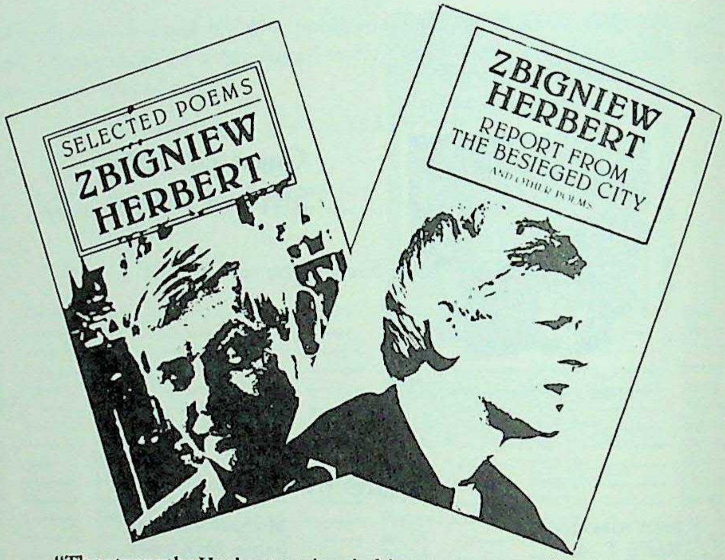
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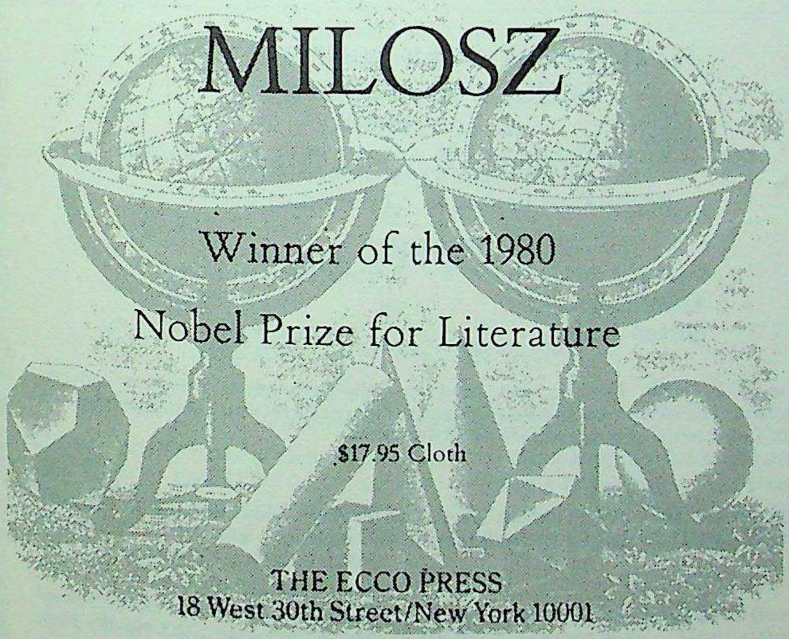

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—W. S. Merwin

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POETRY

MAY 1986

BRENDAN GALVIN

FOG TOWNSHIP

It's that delicate time
when things could spill
any way, when fog
rides into the hollows,
making bays, and Cathedral
and Round Hills are
high islands. Brooks
have already churned back
into their beds to trickle
their own placid names
again, and cloud shadows
have drawn across
the landscape's lightest
moments. Now I begin
to hear something trying
to come through, a message
tapped on twigs out there:
the spring genius of this
foggy township knitting up
cable and chain to bind
the acres, among moss stitches

laying down her simple
seed and fern stitch,
complicating the landscape
a pattern a day: daisy
stitches and wild oats,
berry knots interspersed
with traveling vine
and dogwood. Her needles,
cut from oak tips,
click like sparks fired
across a gap, and I
imagine her crouched on
a stump, hair wet, pulling
April back together.
But for the lethargy that's
floating in this fog
in nets so fine they can't
be seen, I might walk around
out there until I meet her,
or scare off the jay
who's chipping for sustenance
along a pine's gray limb.

POLE BEANS

Bed is right, the way
I tucked seeds into mounds
and in a few days
they sat up, seeming to rub
sleep from their new faces,

and later opened
little getaway wings,
then threw grappling arms
around poles to rise,
hanging on until

they could raise themselves
a few days higher
into fog, considering droplets
as the mind examines ideas,
aspiring over their heads

even as I tore out
creeping indolence and the other
weeds, and deflated slugs
who gorged on them
like bad habits.

And so, having started them
on their way, and regretting
I have to leave them
to everything that
noses through the dark,

I will rig up the guidelines
whereby they get a chance
to scrawl signatures
on the air, and pretend
fatherly surprise at their
blue outbursts,

and remove whatever swells
under their green hearts
until one night the snow
turns them sepia—handwriting
over the backs of old photographs.

MAYFLIES

Years in the bottom scum
of local cow ponds,
wriggling free of former
selves, learning new ways
to breathe—till they rise
in unison before a dawn, unable
even to feed, between their brad
heads and split tail-hairs
new wings that drive
each female to charge
a wandering black cloud of
mates that looks as though
it could jam horsepower.

Under them frogs dance
and splay, tonguing air
to get up where birds
work the swarm's crackling edge
before its passion fails
to a carbon fall.

Let the great trees look down
and judge from their hill
above the school how close it comes
to the May evening
a cloud of color swirls
in that cafeteria.

Prom night: plenty inside
would tell you that school
and this one-cylinder town
are like life under water,
the whole cycle. But tonight,
trailing sherbet colors
and scents those colors might have
all over town, they seem taller

than last year, as around them
parents set off flashbulbs . . . .

Here I will let analogies fail,
not say what mothers and fathers
and teachers are like,
but drop such connections into
the mind of Jimmy, town drunk,
where they will spin and grow wet,
leaves on a pool awhile,
which drift, sink, decompose as
he watches from those trees.

NEAL BOWERS

THE DANCE

For Nancy

We met because we couldn't dance
but shuffled on the sidelines
where the second-stringers sat
through season after season
studying the bright hardwood
between their feet.

Out on the floor
their agile friends and ours
made moves almost beyond belief—
like making love, we thought,
and practiced in our minds
the moves our limbs could never learn.

On that dim-lit periphery
where time is always out
we had our own eternity
to get it right and found
in our two tuneless hearts
a common beat.

I think of this
years later as we fold the sheets,
matching seams and corners,
coming closer with each fold
like graceful ballroom dancers,
mindless of our feet.

FOR THE HEART

Running on Highway 30, the last leg
of a long route in early evening heat,
I was soaked through and talking to myself
like a fighter in the late rounds
when a car slowed down to match my pace
and Dale Shoemaker, killed in Vietnam
just out of high school twenty years ago,
leaned over from behind the wheel and grinned his
yearbook grin, then gunned the engine and disappeared
around a curve bowed out with August corn.

For a moment the air held still,
a bell about to ring, a wave
drawn back before it falls,
and I saw Dale Shoemaker, whom we called
"Mole" for fun, for love, the way he was
and would always be, a boy without responsibility,
free to drive the countryside forever, not tagged
by yearbook editors, who didn't know him,
with a quotation that read like an epitaph—
"Every mission constitutes a pledge of duty"—
not dead of duty in a wet field far from home,
not middle-aged and legging it down the backroads
of America, as if this one, too, were winnable.

BRING PIES

Apple for illness, chocolate for grief,
the consolations of cinnamon and cocoa—
these are the best bouquets.
Come bearing baskets of custards sliced thick
and certain of themselves, solid
in the platter and heavy as fact.

Serve up a slab for everyone to heft,
to weigh your true concern—not
floral scent and petals but a wedge
of the great, serious circle, forked
up and swallowed, smooth as resignation,
sweet as loss, with seconds all around.

ROBERT MORGAN

THE CHARGE

On first coming to the ridges,
washed up on this wild, high shore
from lowland debt, indenture, this
one stayed his first year in a tree,
the story was. I see him clothed
in beard and hair and hides, asleep
on his rifle and feet, a quick
pith warming the trunk through the long
winter. Far above him bees have
filled the hulk with honey that drips
into his cell. In storms the living
tower creaks and he may remember
castles or months of his passage
here. He fits the hollow like a charge
unfired, the heart figure of rage
and hunger that will shoot and chop
and burn and plant his way across
the slopes when he wakens some morning
in late winter and sees thaw-light
and his own stained hands throwing
the shadow of all he is and
needs to lay the wilderness
except a woman's cooking spoon.

VISITORS

The ground is haunted by the Cherokee.
Ashes, teeth of arrows, pottery,
work up in the Old Fields. Digging
for ginseng I'm afraid of cutting
a rotted hand. Half the boulders seem
scratched with messages. Over the rim
of the Craggies clouds lift signals.
In company with word and star all
weeds are medicine. The rivers
have names they repeat forever
just out of hearing. A doe
shows her thigh through the shadows.
The names Saluda, Oklawaha, run
a secret stairway of the spine.
What one deity shall we
raise to speak to their powerful many?

J. W. RIVERS

ILLINOIS: AT NIGHT, BLACK HAWK'S STATUE BROODS

For Robt. D. Sutherland

The forests I believed in,
Where pathways were open,
Come to this:
Duck decoys,
Picnic tables,
Oak furniture,
Faces in mirrors.

Where is my father,
Who thrived
On a trickle of water,
Could feast
On skunk or buzzard?

My mother, whose hands,
Weaving like sand in the wind,
Took in birds
To mend their broken wings?

The land is old and tired,
It sleeps in its own shadow.

I cannot kneel
To touch the soil.
The wind in my ears
Makes everywhere
And nowhere
My home.

JIM HALL

ONE-LINERS

"In America, don't ever go anywhere you haven't
been before, and if you do, take a gun."
Jim Crumley

The Ache hatches in your throat with the sunrise.
The sun setting sets you off.
You ice the chest and drive into America, thirsty.
You put out one hangover with the next one.
It's just one goddamn thing after another, in America.
If it's not the water, it's the air.
If it's not the hamburgers, it's the rain.
We've got it so good, we'll never get rid of it.
You can drive for weeks in America and not see a human.
You can drive through some states with your eyes closed.
In America, everything we manufacture fits in your car.
You drink until you can not drink.
The more you drink, the better at it you get.
A case of Bud will get you across both Dakotas.
Even Montana disappears at ninety-five.
You can stay drunk for twenty years and no one calls you on it.
If no one's after you, who are they in the rearview mirror?
Every billboard, every road sign in America owns a bullethole.
When the sun rises in America, the Ache wakes.
Every day looks like a day you might need your gun.

WORKING TO THE TOP

In my yard the buried won't stay put.
A silver hasp from France,
the femur of a family pet,
the arm of a rubber doll, its hand open.
They rise toward the light like zombies.
And I kneel, wriggle them free,
wash them, add them to the collection.

The peso,
the sterling silver serving spoon,
the tin racing car,
worth something to someone sometime,
caught in the capricious tide of dust
and grass and years,
washed under, held below
until their owners had moved on.

A baseball hide,
a mangled plastic soldier,
the key to a Chevrolet.
They writhe to the surface, reach up
through the thicket of roots.
And even though they haunt me,
I preserve them on my bookshelf,
specimens of randomness,
whimsies fossilized.
Lost in the grass some afternoon,
recalled from their dark amnesia.
Not my idea of treasure,
merely what the earth has given up.

OURSELVES

At paseo in Spain, we pushed
no strollers, had no wails to soothe.
We slipped through the throng
as dark eyes brooded for us.
What accident or war,
what misspent hour, what surgery,
kept that grand complication from us?
What had frustrated our bringing our flesh
outside our own flesh,
that easiest of all immortalities.

In France, they winked sinfully,
as if we'd discovered the perfect
summer camp to store our encumbrances,
and could steal these hours
hand in hand, a table in the sun,
our faces reddening with wine and lust.

Back here they believe they know us.
Waiting till the car and house are paid for,
or some other hunger has been fulfilled.
In shopping malls their eyes are occupied
with their own bright desires.
We move untethered and unseen among them,
no one to explain things to but ourselves.

TENNIS ELBOW

From having fun
one way only,
doing the same thing,
the same way exactly,
grinding membranes
that once oiled
every movement,
that once made
the fluid glide
of bone on bone,
the thud absorbed,
again absorbed,
until the thin pad
cushioning the heavy
parts of me from
the heavy parts of me
crumbles, disintegrates.
From years of grooving
the stroke: bounce-hit,
bounce-hit, rehearse,
rehearse, racket back,
stroke, strike, follow
through. I know no
other way. The one trick
I know has worn thin
the cartilage,
has ground it down,
until it absorbs no more,
until I am in touch
with myself. Parts
never meant to touch
are touching. They touch
again, crush and grind,
until I am bright with ache.
And every winner I ever hit,

every exquisite triumph
has made me exquisitely tender,
put a twinge in my step,
a shine in every simple act I do.

G. E. MURRAY

NORTHERN EXPOSURES

For Richard Hugo

You hear the roadhouse before you see it,
Its four-beat country tunes
Amplified like surf through the woods,
Silencing bullfrog and red-tailed hawk,
Setting beards of moss dancing
On the dim, indeterminate trees
That border the two-lane blacktop.
Docked tonight, you reveal the badge
Of the farmer, that blanched expanse of skin
Where cap shades face, babyhood
Pallor above the sun-blackened jaw
Bulging uneasy with a concrete grin
And the inevitable need to weep.
Don't you think we live and breathe
In the meantime, in lockstep
With dawn, sunset, brawling dawn?
Even now, you await secrets worse
Than the few known ways a seized sky
Will come to survive your pity.
But on another far field, celebrated
For its arrivals and evictions, you learn
To be beautiful, never leading
A sensible life, playing ball in the early dark,
Fighting for a taste of the sweet spot,
In this uncut land, this straight-edged air.
Whadya want to know that isn't yet a mystery
Somewhere, a confidential stumble, heat
Lightening, a first-rate backseat turndown?
So it is that later you track high above

Familiar tamarack and ash, beginning
The next inaccuracy alone, and again,
Remembering that everything east of you
Has already happened, on the same cold ground,
In a swarm of time, finally spiked home
To your surprise, nails flung to the air,
And us all thumbs to the hot hammer-licks
You hear from the roadhouse before you see it.

FLYING LOW, NEAR FRANCE, AMONG BIRDS

I'm coming in right on line from Lille.
I'm veering south far beyond attention,
Focusing low and tight on a blue stain
Of innocence there on a bronze cheek.
I'm coming down with something now,
Indications of the usual, soft yawns,
Night relief, making most of disattachments,
While yielding to speech on an evening
With anything else but the last light out.
I'm still coming in on line from Lille,
And everywhere fresh contours, everywhere
There are glimpses of the delicious
In a losing struggle against bad air,
Womb of clouds. Faster, from Lille,
I'm punching huge holes through filament
Gaining time on that beacon just off the jetty.
I'm hugging up and bloomed soon enough,
A late diver, continuing to turn smack
Into the flight of a hawk, arriving worthwhile,
Stranger among perfumes and tailfeathers.

JOAN COLBY

TARGET FIXATION

I

A target draws the eye
to its pupil
mirror of risk

an arrow aimed
at circles
a dart seeking cuneiforms
of black and yellow

two kinds of targets:
one to plunge within
the other for guidance

like the immense Nazca forms
of the Peruvian desert
discernible only from the sky.
Who reckoned by these figures
before the age of flyers?

It is thought the gods of purpose
looked down on them with favor.
Targets
drinking the eye
like blue angels.

II

Four planes fly
in close formation. A simple maneuver
looping to the apex of sky
then leveling to skim
mesquite and tumbleweed.

The lead pilot
can't unlock his gaze.
The ground target blooms
a black hole, door
to the earth's heart.

The grave
dream of unification
hypnotizes him, a sacred mystery,
equation of perfect trust,
each equidistant wing
obeys precision, flying
into the nothingness of a center.

No failure of instrument or nerve.
Only these blue angels
plunging into charred
crosses on the desert floor.

ROBERT A. FINK

CONSIDER

You have chanced upon a wreck
in the smoldering dusk
just over a hill
minutes from a cookout in the country,
a going-away-party for a friend.

Your car hums sleek and fast enough
to escape this time, break through
this warp of memory
fading in the rearview mirror.

But you stop, back up, first to arrive,
no one to pinch you back to sleep
relieved the melted shapes
indistinguishable as cars,
no need to venture deeper in this dream
to what might be windows to other dreams
darker than imagination.

Nothing moves but the wind
and you between the cars
a hundred feet apart, spun off the road
like errors in an arcade game.

No time for contemplation
but the drivers are not going anywhere,
their passengers asleep for now
and you're no Boy Scout,
so look hard into this mangled face
before the T.V. crews arrive
to pry the easy questions.

MOTHER'S DAY

Tornado humid
and still as an elderly couple
in a car about to spin the highway:
an oak tree comes into focus,
an anonymous field of white-faced cows.

Outside my window, new pecan leaves
droop green as if the scene were underwater
or a lost world cut off from explanation.
A cardinal flashes past, complicates the scheme.
Memory is a fickle teacher

never satisfied with any one position,
so I turn seven and snug between a V
of sycamore limbs swaying green
between the sky, one fist of blue above my head,
and the ground thirty feet below

where my mother waits
holding her apron like a net
making promises we both know
she cannot keep.

THE NEED FOR ORDER

Comes upon me in my middle years
like the settling of a house,
the cracks so gradual
I can't recall the ceiling smooth,
the corners square.

No one cares but me
the furniture's sneaking from its spot
like children playing Red Light Green Light
on the lawn I mow twice a week.
Everything is slipping from its place:

The travel posters in their frames.
The philodendrons always turning toward the light.
Blue jeans my sons drop careless on the floor
to shrink a little every day.
At least I have my study.

No one but me reshelves a book.
The plants stay silk.
The sharpened pencils on my desk wait
straight as pickets,
dominoes in a row.

VICTORIA HALLERMAN

A SCULPTURE BY GEORGE SEGAL

They've been standing at the light
so long they've turned to salt.
Maybe they're confused because
it says WALK, DON'T WALK.
The man in the foreground has forgotten
where he is, wide stance,
hands in pockets.
He'd be meditating if he weren't
ash-white and immobile.
They might be enchanted,
folks who've stepped into a fairy ring—
a hundred years won't age them a minute.
They'll wake up, the light will change,
and they'll have the whole planet
to themselves.

THE ROAD HOME

Light slips over the asphalt at regular intervals,
road-ghosts evading pressure of tire on pavement.
A three-dimensional hand waves from a billboard.
I cross the bridge.
Downriver the coffee cup empties two red drops
then collects them.
I could still have a child—

in this world that borders the turnpike,
its service areas named for cancer victims
or heroes.
I stop for gas at Walt Whitman.
Across the marshes the Empire State Building is sinking,
rocket on a collapsed pad.
This is the lab of the world—
pipes with tongues of pale green flame,

domes and spirit lamps.
Sometimes Newark smells like rubber bands.
The sports arena, concrete spider, hugs the flatland—
six white lights trail off from it like code.
A neon leaf greens itself
beneath the blackened grid of the Pulaski Skyway—
the egg in me moves down to the mouth of the world.

SLIPPAGE: A WRITING-ROOM IDYLL

I sit here blank as the zeroes on a rung-out cash register,
  its drawer open for the evening,
the cashier with her half-read romance gone home.

The dogs stretch retractible tongues into hollows,
  nipping the welts on their bellies
and thighs, their fleas busy as cliffdwellers.

Aunt Lottie smiles from the refuge of her picture,
  smiles but says nothing,
her dress white as a column of salt.

The violets I never planted faint against a wall,
  a small dead snake's coiled
like licorice on the step where last night

my sister slapped her leg and killed a firefly,
  oiling her thigh with its light.

CHRIS BURSK

SISTERS

You drive your car as far away
as your lunchbreak lets you,
park on the soft shoulder of River Road,
bend over your notebook as if
peering through a dusty skylight
into a deserted house, nudge open the window, let yourself
down into the hall—for every step there's an echo.
All the furniture has been left as it was,
the rosewood chest, the bevelled cabinet,
your father's wide desk,
the fluted, laurel-wreathed woodwork
you rub the dust off.
Now you feel at your side a rustling
nightgown, your sister, shy and severe
as she's always been. She depends on you
to come. Now she's escaped from the upper room,
voiceless, pale, almost invisible—you stick out your tongue,
make faces till she has to take your sleeve,
draw you to the window. You see your father below,
his face emptied by the light, your mother's gaunt shadow
who'd never talked of this sister—what could she have done
to be so terribly punished?
Even now you listen at their bedroom door
as if you might still hear a stifled cry,
her name spoken sharply.
Your sister is as thin as ever,
on her face a vague pain as if she were about to disappear
in some dim place in her mind. Why have you never
gathered her in your arms?
This is the only way you know:
you open your notebook,
showing her page after page.
She cannot vanish now, you keep her here with your words,
this is the only thing she will listen to,
these dark poems.

THE TREES KEEPING THEIR PLACE, SAYING NOTHING

She had come back from the woods
carrying her dress over her outstretched arms
like a child rescued from the lake,
offered it up to her husband's mother.
No one had said anything,
they had hurried her to bed.

She'd be fine, they told themselves.
One afternoon she came down from her nap
with the porcelain doll she'd had from childhood,
its savaged hair
in her limp hands, its scalp bald, face smudged
from where she'd rubbed it over and over.

What unspeakable act had been committed
against her? What had driven her
to this, her husband
wanted to know. At night, after making love,
she'd sit up and watch
just as he was falling asleep.
He looked like a wounded deer, too stunned
to move, to care, and she'd place her hand
on his chest, where the throbbing was.

Sycamore, black willow, sourwood, poplar—
these old bachelors never told,
these old domestics who served the family well,
why she carried her rage into the woods again,
a knife that shimmered so brightly
anywhere she tilted it
it was silver, many broken pieces of a mirror.
Why not plunge it in?
It would shine,
it would carry the light into her,
it would be the one pure motion of her life.

ROWING CUTTHROAT CREEK

I hate him, I hate him, Samuel told the oars,
the boat, the creek—he was rowing the black freight
of an old hurt he couldn't budge on land,
but afloat, there was nothing he couldn't slide forward,
I hate him, I hate him,
the arms thrusting before him
as if shoving a man against a wall,
jerking him back.

His father was the weight of the water
Samuel was pushing out of the way, the air
he was cutting, blade after blade. At home
his father was in the bread Samuel ate,
in the shadows on the walls, in the windows
Samuel wanted to break but didn't dare.
But here on the water, Samuel
could dip his blade in the man's body
again, again, get a rhythm to his rage,
let it propel him forward, nothing could stop him now,
make him feel stupid or small again.

And in the evening he could go back,
and what had seemed heavy in his hands
would be light, hammer, axe, firewood, family bible
weightless in his hands: he had lifted the creek,
the sun flashing off his oars, water
had unraveled at his touch,
the face of the man was in the waves
and he broke it
and the body of the man stretched out under him
and he moved over it.

DONALD HALL

SUMS

From *"The Daye-Boke of Adam Raison"*
(1515–1560)

From that daye thee Hart strokys
his meeter. Kingesguard sette us
at Rodesyde while they stepd himm
past us in his whyte Veste:
Necke stode free of its Collare
for thee Axe at thee 8e Belle.

Somme theyre cryed: "Kingeslayer
Piggeshart!" Boyes through Turdes
striking his Bodye striding—
his Feete wide to balance himm,
his Handes thongedd thighither—
the laste Rodd of his Manhode.

In his Necke a blew Veyne throbbed
thee Hartsblodde—*onne*, and *onne*—
as if to rekkon Summes. Then Knees
bangd on newe Wode of Scaffholde,
Axemann gruntyd, glintt of bryght
Blade. Blodde-russhe.

DAVID WOJAHN

PENTECOST

Inside the cage, a cardtable with
a broken leg, an ancient Olivetti
and the bars etching stripes—
diagonal across the face of the man
who crouches there, a shell case
for a stool, talking to himself
in an English of his own design.
Writing in a spiral notebook, the kind
a child would take to school,
he tugs his beard's gray stubble.
This is Pisa, Nineteen Forty-five.
Beyond the prison compound's barbed
wire mesh, twenty yards away, my father
in his corporal's stripes sips sick-
sweet grappa at a cafe with the men
of his platoon, the latticework canopy
intricately shadowing his face
as if he wore a beekeeper's veil.
He must wait ten days until a DC-3
can ferry him to the Azores;
then, a troop ship to Havana.
But until then he must help to guard
a compound for Italian prisoners
and spies, pacing the rows of tents
and cages every night from eight
until two. Some nights he smuggles
cigarettes and chocolates to the old man
who claims that he's American himself,
who speaks in whispers from within
the bars, in the corny mannered slang
of a movie cowboy. The old man
doesn't sleep, and sometimes all night
mumbles to himself as he rocks

on his cot, a blanket draped around
his shoulders. Another glass of grappa
and the afternoon appears to lift
its veil, awash in the white
piazza light. My father's friends
have left the table, and he takes out
pencil and paper to write down
the details of this light, its shimmer
on the whitewashed houses—a brilliance,
he thinks, in which the dead arise
to be born anew, and infinitely brighter
than the light he woke to
each morning through his bandages
that long month in Palermo, the Irish
nurse's cool hand on his shoulder.
He'll stare like this all afternoon.
And who could he write this to?
What is it he could say? He drops
his *lire* on the checkered tablecloth,
drains the glass, and blames
the trance of grappa for
the oddness of his thoughts—
how he felt, for a moment,
he'd had the power to speak in Greek,
Italian and Chinese, his thoughts
churning forth in swirling cadences,
like oars striking brightly
against a sea so vivid
he's blinded, and must turn away.

HENRY CARLILE

IN OCEANS, IN RIVERS

For Raymond Carver

Over brine reaches the flat rounds fall.
Cannons to raise the dead, Mark Twain?
It makes no sense to say they
rise to reports they lived by,
corrupt finally in the ocean's peacock eyes,
their own eyes kissed out by fish.

But these have not risen. They race
along grave sunken avenues tides make,
gassing up for the long ascent through
green panes of light, through diatomaceous
snows and the slow pulsing blooms of
blue jellies, lost parachutists of the deeps.

Astern, our dragged lines bend in rips
that toll low warnings from the entrance bell.
We hope no more than fish,
no bent back and downward streaming hair
like seaweed when the sea drains from rocks,
no death that wakes us to ourselves.

•

A suicide once drifted toward my line,
spinning slowly in the frigid river,
his black humped back dipping and rising
as from an unpurged habit of love.

It was May, at the peak of the spring
salmon run, with cherry trees in bloom.
Suspended from school for fighting,
my glasses broken, I squinted

and saw death's gradual moving blur,
black four-pronged star, divining
my rod down, singing my reel
to its clicking mass.

When my line snapped free and slack,
retightening in the current, I knew
how the dead bite, hang on to what
they cannot keep, then slip away.

This is the story I told a friend once
who asked why poets write
so much about death and
why not just go fishing instead.

CAMOUFLAGE

So many piles of leaves are walking about these days
disguised as humans it must give pause.
Originally we meant only to fool ducks, dupe deer
into posing like St. Sebastian, but now it looks
like we are hiding from other heaps that mean harm,
that mean to steal us from our families and lovers
or steel us against the unhappy prospect of quaking
like so many aspens in the arms of winter.

Or is it simply that we mean to advertise a sincere
wish to become one with nature and quietly disappear
toting our taped and silenced M-16's and Mini-14's
and other automatic acronyms of extreme prejudice?
There is big business in camouflage these days.
We can be anything we want to be at last!
A summer wood, an autumn wood, a big beige desert.
We can even be dead grass, we can be snow.
And let me not fail to mention our latest fashion,
Night. Night is very popular these days.

What we do not want to be is colorful, color is
suspect, a thing of the past, except for a week or
maybe two weeks in spring, during the spring offensives,
when even the desert forgets itself and laughs floridly.
Then it is safe to be a field of poppies.

But we must never forget the latest heat-seeking
technologies that have kept pace with our trade.
Telescopes so powerful they are capable of detecting,
at incredible distances in the coldest environments,
the small trembling heart of a mouse, o soldiers of
fortune and misfortune, they mean to find us out,
to discover in our iciest resolve a spot of warmth.

BLESSINGS AND RAIN

Blessing, by Christopher Jane Corkery. Princeton University Press. $13.95 cloth; $7.50 paper.

Christopher Jane Corkery's poems long for an imperishable realm, a place without the demands and liabilities of the flesh. Death will not exist there, but neither will love; nothing to upset the tranquility of the contemplative life. In "Metamorphosis to Punta Gorda," a middle-aged gynecologist, having earlier discovered his talent for living alone, decides to leave his family and retreat to an island:

> The truth is I will never touch a woman's breast
> in passion, or any other way.
> What is left is simply to dissolve,
> like smoke or fog,
> take on the contours of the sand,
> turning dryness to a virtue.

Like her characters, the poet too seems to wish for an exit from the body, an island of ethereality. Where this process would lead, in the work of another poet—one thinks of Stevens, Ashbery, the younger John Koethe—to intellectual acrobatics, a dazzling dance of unfettered imagination, in Corkery's poems the emphasis is on the negative step of rejecting the real rather than the positive one of accepting the unreal.

Perhaps it is this negative emphasis that accounts for the flatness of style in *Blessing*; the poems are, unfortunately, as colorless and bloodless in their writing as they are in their themes. Corkery's phrasing is dry and academic; her motive is to make things clear, not to make them beautiful. In another monologue, an aged painter promises to react to some pictures, but not today: "I will sit and face them / and wait until my eyes / record every side / of the colors' conversation. . . . / My skin will absorb now / what the pictures say." The poem centers on a character and his life situation but contains no more drama than it does descriptive beauty; the author is interested—both verbally and thematically—in static states of being. Her writing is remarkably devoid of action, fecundity, and engagement.

Driving the Body Back, by Mary Swander. Alfred A. Knopf. $14.95 cloth; $8.95 paper.

Mary Swander travels to an opposite extreme in her new book, the poems of which are narrative and descriptive. Each tells the story of a single country character, all of them ancestors to the narrator. It is work based almost entirely upon reality; spirit, intellection, and ethereality are scarcely to be found. When the poems are good, it is thanks to accurate seeing and telling, as in this passage of folk wisdom from "Grandma":

> "Have you come for a cure or
> to confess your sins?"
> "A cure. But I have sinned in
> my life, Grandma."
> "Oh? What have you done?"
> "Well, I've smoked a little.
> Will that keep me out of heaven?"
> "No. Smoking won't keep you out.
> What else you done?"
> "I've taken a drink or two. Will
> drinking keep me out of heaven?"
> "Drinking won't. What else you done?"
> "I've taken a chew once or twice.
> Will chewing keep me out?"
> "No. You can go to heaven if you
> chew, but you have to go to hell to spit."

Grandma is old and later she dies. As its title indicates, the book is about deaths and changes, the gradual dwindling of the family down to the speaker and her listener, the "you" of these poems, probably a sister.

Mary Swander may seem to some readers like a rural Louis Simpson, but there is an important difference. On their surface, Simpson's poems seem flat, prosaic, and literal. Beneath that level, however, one generally finds a central image that gradually gathers resonance until, near the end of the poem, it makes manifest feelings that had been only latent before then. Swander's poems do not develop that kind of depth. Instead, they are satisfied with surface detail, factual truth. The book is humorous and elegiac, feelings generated both by the specific characters—their lives and deaths—and by the more general passing of a culture. The absence of anything more than this, however, reduces too many of the poems to the level either of joke or cemetery memoir.

Swan's Island, by Elizabeth Spires. Holt, Rinehart and Winston. $8.95.

Where Christopher Jane Corkery levitates towards a poetry of pure mind and Mary Swander gravitates towards one of pure body, Elizabeth Spires stands for something in between. The first section of her second volume is given over to poems dealing explicitly, intellectually, with the soul/body question, while the poems in the second section are concerned with the topic of physical love. A point of balance is achieved between the two, largely through the poet's use of a neo-metaphysical style. The Metaphysical poets wished to unite, through a use of significant, indicative, and lovingly sensual imagery, the intellect and the emotions. This certainly happens in "A Book of Hours," which comments on the contradictory impulses of spirituality and aestheticism inherent in the production of one of these medieval masterpieces.

The poem opens with a passage that both embodies and celebrates the physical beauty of such a volume:

> Bound in blue morocco, tooled in gold,
> the book is small, untouchable,
> each page framed by a border:
> acanthus, columbine, thistle-on-gold,
> and forget-me-nots scattered
> abundantly in the margins,
> profuse, startling,
> the painted dragonfly a miracle
> of *trompe l'oeil*, appearing
> to have landed on the page
> only a moment ago
> when our backs were turned
> to the open window.

Spires achieves a kind of transcendence by endowing these sensual images with spirituality—admittedly an easy feat when the object one is describing is already sacred in its own right.

The same effect is achieved, however, in the love poems of section two, for example "Love's Body," which uses an object drawn from the external world of reality—a tree branch—to express an internal state of mind—love. The poem resembles Frost's, to which it even seems to reply:

> never is the branch swept down
> and carried away . . .

Instead, it holds to itself
like the mind in meditation
or, bad days,
sways back and forth, back and forth,
the way one does in love when torn in two,
the hidden heartwood
darkening in a word flood of emotion . . .
as we come and go, come and go . . .
branch to leafless
branch with each other, Nature breaking me
down into something new
I artlessly suffer to tell you.

The voice in these poems speaks mostly for the mind; things tend to be under control, subject to the gaze of the intellect. Thus Spires is able to mirror the tension that always exists between mind and body at the same time as she reflects upon it. *Swan's Island* is a rewarding book, offering poems both lyrical and intellectual, both sensual and contemplative.

Any Given Day, by Ralph Burns. University of Alabama Press. $6.95.

The aims of Ralph Burns are certainly laudable; he wishes to write poems in which feeling, tempered by understanding, is expressed in striking metaphors that zing straight to the heart and mind of the reader. Unfortunately, his writing has an inherent clumsiness that results, I think, from an attempt not to develop his own techniques but to emulate the methods of others. Let's look at the progress of one of his better poems, "Again, Father":

You are like the man who drove off a dirt road
one Saturday and sat until help came
but the stars only turned over and over
and a family turned their lights on.
You think this story goes on and on,
a tiny contrite scene that passes breath
to solitary breath, wind and stars to
reasonable sky. An old coach said you never
really break your arm but repair it through

memory, you drop your head and close your
eyes and reconcile all loss. Roads I remember
aren't roads anymore. I see them everywhere gone
all those quiet detonative years,
all that summer when your mind went wrong.

The poem is full of familiar rhetorical gestures that only seem to convey meaning. The opening metaphor—having a mental breakdown is like driving your car off a road—while not particularly original, is at least clear. But why should the person who had the breakdown be assumed to understand the metaphorical story well enough to think it "goes on and on"? And what does it mean to say that that story is "a tiny contrite scene that passes breath / to solitary breath"? Even this precious formulation is more acceptable than what immediately follows it—the Platonic aphorism of a coach who clearly was hit in the head one too many times.

The wisdom of this poem is only a surface illusion; it results from Ralph Burns's use of two techniques painfully familiar to readers of contemporary poetry—the vague metaphor and the wise old fool. Today's poets are forever quoting such sages, Ralph Burns as often as any; in another poem he gets off this quick series of two: "I don't know who first told me, / *You'll die someday, you can't live forever.* / I don't know who first took my hand and said, / *Some things, not all things, are possible.*" The posed naïveté is as dreary and common as the banal advice. *Any Given Day* is a book based too much on fashionable conventionalities and far too little on an earned personal insight.

Winter Stars, by Larry Levis. University of Pittsburgh Press. $13.95 cloth; $6.95 paper.

The poems of Larry Levis are linear; they progress down the page in a casual, almost chatty fashion, gathering ideas, images, scenes, events, and anecdotes as they occur to the speaker—a harried man, haunted by death and squandered love. Sometimes the process is too easy, the poem too obviously true in an everyday sense, as at the end of "Though His Name Is Infinite, My Father Is Asleep," one of many elegies in the volume: "And then, / Before sleep / . . . tell how two words, / That mean nothing to anyone / Else, once meant a world / To you; how sometimes, even you, / In the sweep of those syllables, / Wind, crushed bone, & ashes— / Begin to live again." The subject is moving, certainly, and the lines express a deep personal truth. But they are too direct, too naked, and lack the subtlety of Levis's better poems here.

Among the best of those is one called "There Are Two Worlds." The real subject of this poem—the speaker's desire to quit his wild life and go back home to his wife and child—is presented through seemingly-unrelated talk about Mark Twain, horse racing, the possibility of sacredness in a fallen world, and the stars over Twain's Mississippi:

> There, above the river, if
> The pattern of the stars is a blueprint for a heaven
> Left unfinished,
>
> I also believe the ankle of a horse,
> In the seventh furlong, is as delicate as the fine lace
> Of faith, & therefore holy.

In this instance, the casualness is cunning rather than clumsy, the rhetorical structure convincing.

At the end of the poem, all the images set in motion earlier are brought together in a multi-faceted definition of home and mature desire:

> It will be, it might be still,
> A place where what can only remain holy grazes, &
> Where men might, also, approach with soft halters,
> And, having no alternative, lead that fast world
>
> Home—though it is only to the closed dark of stalls,
> And though the men walk ahead of the horses slightly
> Afraid, & at all times in awe of their
> Quickness, & how they have nothing to lose, especially
>
> Now, when the first stars appear slowly enough
> To be counted, & the breath of horses makes white signatures
>
> On the air: *Last Button, No Kidding, Brief Affair*—
>
> And the air is colder.

The names of the horses express both the speaker's current situation and what he must plan to say to his disaffected wife. Passages like this attain emotional and rhetorical power from the plainness of their context. Levis's casualness is studied, a more complicated affair that it at first appears. He handles his materials with an understated authority, a streetwise *savoir faire.*

Wild Gratitude, by Edward Hirsch. Alfred A. Knopf. $14.95 cloth; $7.95 paper.

The work of Edward Hirsch has deepened since his impressive first book, *For the Sleepwalkers.* Imagination is dominant in that volume: the world is seen through the eyes of a magic realist and rendered in the words of a master rhetorician. *Wild Gratitude*, Hirsch's second volume, is more full of feeling than bewitchment; as the epigraph (from Auden) promises, it reaches for joy while recognizing deep pain: "May I, composed like them / Of Eros and of dust, / Beleaguered by the same / Negation and despair, / Show an affirming flame."

The attitude of praise and celebration that permeates this volume is established in the title poem, which opens with its speaker fondling his cat Zooey and ". . . thinking about the poet, Christopher Smart, / Who wanted to kneel down and pray without ceasing / In every one of the splintered London streets, // And was locked away in the madhouse at St. Luke's / With his sad religious mania, and his wild gratitude, / And his grave prayers for the other lunatics, / And his great love for his speckled cat, Jeoffry." The lines are remarkable for their speed—the syntax, which favors parallel phrasal structures, and the rhythm, which relies on strings of unstressed syllables, both rush the reader forward from word to word, line to line. The overall effect is one of celebration, and it is only on a later reading that the reader can really hear words that work contrary to this spirit: "splintered," "madhouse," "sad," "grave."

Three of those four words are adjectives; it is striking how often in this book Hirsch relies on modifiers to convey nuance in his poems. Here the technique is used to advantage and does not cause a problem, though other poems seem weak in direct proportion to the number of modifiers that they contain. Sometimes, in fact, Hirsch will couple a noun with what seems its most familiar adjective, as in the poem "Omen," which contains such phrases as: "fitful half-sleep," "hushed sound," "small, airless ward," "stormy clouds," and "cruel dream." The poem, about a case of cancer, also uses the too easy epithet "my closest friend" twice.

One reason for the problems in "Omen" is the powerful nature of the subject matter; the poet's feelings seem stronger than his ability to control them through art. Another reason is that Hirsch's style is so highly rhetorical that even the slightest misstep will cause a poem to cross the borderline between effectiveness and excess. It is interesting that one of the best poems in the book should treat the same subject as "Omen" with an almost minimalist sense of restraint. "Fast Break" uses an extended metaphor drawn from basketball to express the fatal, perhaps as yet undetected, disease beginning to work on an excellent player.

The description, remarkably fluid, begins as "A hook shot kisses the rim . . . / but doesn't drop"; the defensive center takes the rebound and initiates the break with a perfect outlet pass. After several more passes, the last guard who could stop the play

lunges out
and commits to the wrong man

while the power-forward explodes past them
in a fury, taking the ball into the air

by himself now and laying it gently
against the glass for a lay-up,

but losing his balance in the process,
inexplicably falling, hitting the floor

with a wild, headlong motion
for the game he loved like a country

and swiveling back to see an orange blur
floating perfectly through the net.

Perhaps the best detail in this poem is that the shot is made; only the player's surprising fall indicates something wrong, some portending interruption to graceful process. Thus the poem, like this entire volume, expresses both joy and sorrow, triumph and pain. Edward Hirsch is a poet of genuine talent and feeling; as he learns to administer with lighter touch his considerable linguistic fertility, he will surely grow into one of the important writers of our age.

Rain, by William Carpenter. Northeastern University Press. $6.95.

William Carpenter seems to specialize in writing elegiac love poems. Beneath its jokey surface, Carpenter's second volume, *Rain*, tells the sad story of a marriage's end. Often the love imagery is literally of death and dismemberment, as in the poem about Sharon, where she and the speaker eat her husband Roger; or in the poem where a hunter falls in love with the body of a drowned woman that he pulls from the water; or in these lines from "New York City," spoken to the lost wife:

> We should cruise Times Square together, where
> the women look familiar. They each have one part
> of you: one of them has your feet, another has
> a wig made from your hair. I could buy all of them,
> I could reconstruct a wife from all these parts . . .

Carpenter owes some of his surface playfulness, which establishes such an interesting counterpoint to what is really going on, to Gabriel Garcia Marquez, from whom he has taken his book's epigraph.

Like everyone else's these days, Carpenter's poems are long and resist the reviewer's need to excerpt. One of his best is "Man Climbing Katahdin," which begins with the hero, after a "final quarrel with his wife," driving up to Maine to climb a mountain:

> On the way, Haydn
> was playing on the radio, but it seemed violent,
> like a Prussian army marching upon his home
> and taking his wife prisoner. He thought of her
> in leg irons with a plate of lobster salad
> just out of reach.

Throughout the poem, the man's obsession is revealed in the way his imagination constantly makes him think of his abandoned wife. At a difficult point on the trail, he feels the presence of Thoreau, who had taken "the same / route up this mountain," and as the poem ends he thinks:

> He wanted to buy something at the campers' store,
> even something stupid, like a shovel, and show up
> in the middle of the night, holding the shovel
> as a sign of peace, and say *this is a shovel*,

> *this is from Thoreau*, so she would have to take it,
> she'd have to let him in and give him coffee while
> he told his story. She'd have to believe him, since
> you have to believe what's there. It's all there is.

Carpenter writes his poems while perched perilously on the lip of a dangerous canyon named cleverness. He rarely falls, and the risk pays wonderful dividends through the crazy energy that it bestows upon his work. And, like all poets of the heart, he never abandons the real world to dance in the never-never land of insubstantial fantasy. Such writers stick to "what's there" because "It's all there is"—this endstopped lifetime of ours. The joyful surface of Carpenter's poems is an implicit response to the real sense of unhappiness they express at a lower level—that same essential and heartfelt mingling effected in different ways by Levis and Hirsch.

PETER STITT

CONTRIBUTORS

BRENDAN GALVIN's fifth collection, *Seals in the Inner Harbor*, will be published later this year by Carnegie-Mellon. He has new poems forthcoming in *The New Yorker*, *TriQuarterly*, and *The Kenyon Review*. In July, he will give a poetry-writing course at the Nathan Mayhew Seminars on Martha's Vineyard.

NEAL BOWERS's critical book *James Dickey: The Poet as Pitchman* appeared last year from the University of Missouri Press. He has new work scheduled in *Hudson Review*, *Yankee*, and *Sewanee Review*.

J. W. RIVERS* has contributed to numerous journals and has published two books, *From the Chicago Notebook* (Spoon River Poetry Press) and *Proud and on My Feet* (Georgia). He lives in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

JIM HALL's new book, *False Statements*, will be issued later this year by Carnegie-Mellon. Recent poems of his have appeared in *American Scholar*, *Georgia Review*, and *Cutbank*. He lives in Key Largo, Florida.

G. E. MURRAY* has published in several literary magazines, and his last book, *Repairs*, won the Devins Award. He works in public relations and advertising and lives in Oak Park, Illinois.

JOAN COLBY has received several literary awards from the Illinois Arts Council and contributes regularly to several little magazines. She is working on a collection of poems and one of short stories.

ROBERT A. FINK* holds degrees from Baylor and Texas Tech University and is an associate professor of English at Hardin-Simmons University, where he directs the creative writing workshops. He has appeared in several literary and scholarly publications.

VICTORIA HALLERMAN holds a B.A. from Hunter and an M.F.A. from Sarah Lawrence and now tutors in a Staten Island public school.

CHRIS BURSK is a student in the M.F.A. Program at Warren Wilson College and has taught the past five years at Bucks County Prison. He recently completed a Guggenheim Fellowship.

DONALD HALL was in China and Japan this spring, reading his poems. Next month, Random House will publish his new book, *The Happy Man*.

DAVID WOJAHN teaches at Indiana University and in the M.F.A. in Writing Program at Vermont College. His new collection, *Glassworks*, will be issued next year by the University of Pittsburgh Press.

HENRY CARLILE's most recent book of poems is *Running Lights* (Dragon Gate, 1981). Last year, he received an Ingram-Merrill Foundation grant. He lives in Portland.

PETER STITT has an N.E.H. fellowship for 1986–87, to work on an authorized biography of James Wright. Last fall, the University of Georgia Press issued his book *The World's Hieroglyphic Beauty: Five American Poets*.

* First appearance in *Poetry*.

NEWS NOTES

THE RUTH LILLY POETRY PRIZE

We are extremely pleased to announce the establishment of a major new award, The Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize. Through the generosity of Mrs. Ruth Lilly, a long-time friend of *Poetry*, the prize of $25,000 will be given annually to an American poet "whose accomplishments warrant extraordinary recognition." In establishing the prize, Mrs. Lilly stated she hoped it would "give a poet the opportunity to devote a significant amount of time to his or her work, and provide the recognition important to the publishing of that work."

The largest such annual award specifically for U.S. poets, The Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize will be offered jointly by The American Council for the Arts, which will administer the prize money, and by The Modern Poetry Association and *Poetry* Magazine, which will be in charge of the award selection process. Joseph Parisi, Editor of *Poetry*, will chair the Selection Panel, which this year will include Maxine Kumin and David Wagoner as judges. The prize, which is restricted to U.S. citizens, will not be the result of a competition, nor will applications be accepted.

The first Prize winner will be announced early this month, and the award will be presented in Chicago during the first week of June, as it will be each year at a reception to be hosted by The American Council for the Arts and The Modern Poetry Association.

We are grateful to Mrs. Lilly for this latest expression of her strong interest in and support of poetry. A resident of Indianapolis, Mrs. Lilly is well known for her personal generosity in making grants to a number of educational institutions; last year she established the Ruth Lilly Professorship in Poetry at Indiana University in Bloomington.

BOOKS RECEIVED

VERSE

Master Bedroom Poems, by Sandra Agricola. Ohio Review Books. $9.95 cloth; $5.95 paper.

The "Rimas" of Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer. Tr. by Bruce Phenix. Merlin Books (Devon). £2.00.

A Reading 1–7, by Beverly Dahlen. Momo's Press (San Francisco). $12.50.

The Gavin Ewart Show: Selected Poems 1939–1985. Bits Press $14.95 cloth; $8.95 paper.

The Avalanche of Time: Selected Poems 1964–1984, by Alex Gildzen. North Atlantic Books (Berkeley). $7.95.

The Fish-Wife, by Cynthia Huntington. University of Hawaii Press. $6.95.

Selected Poems, by Michael McClure. New Directions. $16.50 cloth; $7.95 paper.

Personal Accounts: New and Selected Poems 1966–1986, by Robert Phillips. Ontario Review Press. $16.95 cloth; $9.95 paper.

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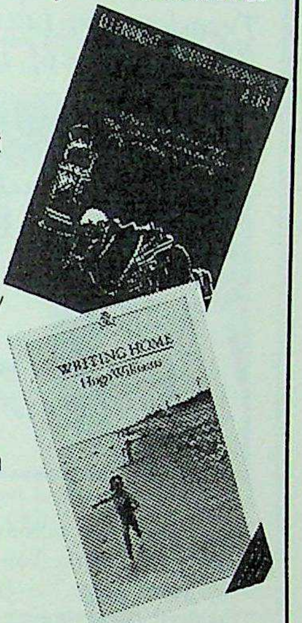

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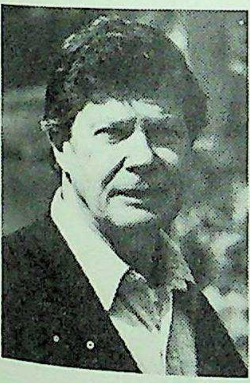

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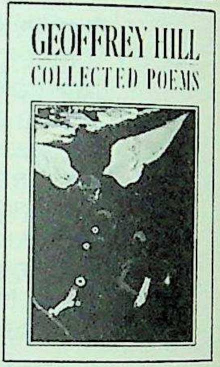

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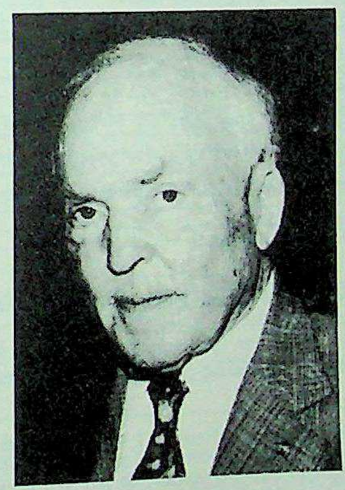

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POETRY

JUNE 1986

JENNIFER ATKINSON

CHOOSING HAPPINESS

For Bob and Margie

The summer
river slows between its banks
—one sloping sand fraught only
by killdeer whose cries are fair
descriptions of the beauty
that is solitude; the other
cut sheer, and overhung with oak
in full leaf, lush, and toppling
gradually forward.
Downstream
canoeing is allowing
the current to do the work,
steering only to avoid
the sandbars, rocks and deadfalls.
We balance our paddles
across the hull, lean back.
This,
we say, *is the life*, meaning
the good, the happy life. As
if happiness were just this
effortless. Affordable.

Just this easy to accept . . . .
Alarmed, a gray heron lifts
from awkwardness into flight.
There are dragonflies, finches,
a catfish, gnawed to the gills
and washed clean. Minnows of such
clear new flesh, we can see right
through to the intimate bone.
Then from the willow grass, rough
with crickets, we startle up
indigo buntings.
                                        We can
choose to call this happiness
life, claim it. As the river
lays claim to the bank-side oaks.
By continuing. By not
refusing.
                                At dusk we share
bread, fish, smoked cheese, tomatoes,
good bourbon and a driftwood
fire. *Stars*, *owl*, *dew*. The moment.
And its passing. That fear.

RAYMOND CARVER

THE RIVER

I waded, deepening, into the dark water.
Evening, and the push
and swirl of the river as it closed
around my legs and held on.
Young grisle broke water.
Parr darted one way, smolt another.
Gravel turned under my boots as I edged out.
Watched by the furious eyes of king salmon.
Their immense heads turned slowly,
eyes burning with fury, as they hung
in the deep current.
They were there. I felt them there,
and my skin prickled. But
there was something else.
I braced with the wind on my neck.
Felt the hair rise
as something touched my boot.
Grew afraid at what I couldn't see.
Then of everything that filled my eyes—
that other shore hung with heavy branches,
the dark mountain range behind.
And this river that had suddenly
grown black and swift.
I drew breath and cast anyway.
Prayed nothing would strike.

A TALL ORDER

This old woman who kept house for them.
She'd seen and heard the most amazing things.
Sights like plates and bottles flying.
An ashtray travelling like a missile
that hit the dog in the head.
Once she let herself in and found a huge
salad in the middle of the dining room table.
It was sprinkled with moldy croutons.
The table was set for six, but nobody
had eaten. Dust filmed the cups and silver.
Upstairs a man pleaded
not to have his hair pulled by the roots again.
Please, please, please he cried.

Her job was to set the house in order.
At least make it like she'd left it last time.
That was all. Nobody asked her opinion,
and she didn't give it. She put on her apron.
Turned the hot water on full, drowning out
that other sound. Her arms went into the suds
to her elbows. She leaned on the counter.
And stared into the backyard where they kept
the rusty swing set and Jungle-Gym bars.
If she kept watching, she was sure to see
the elephant step out of the trees and trumpet
as it did every Monday at this house, at this hour.

ROGER WEINGARTEN

BARN CAT SUMMER

For Mark Cox

Sometimes I climb the silo
on a full moon night, tie myself
and a six pack to the top rung, smoke
and drink one after another and slowly
scrutinize the flickering details
until I can see the waterswollen
satellite in the amber bottle and lob it
high over the corn crib's
horizon of slats alive with raccoon shadows.
Under the cover of a temporary
stillness I never want to come out from,
that sickly sweetness when a wingspread
white owl drops out of the dark
and I know
I can say the thing that makes
every beer-bellied, chain-smoking
hump of self-pity as quietly
beautiful as a butterfly drying its wings,
then apologize to the bullfrogs
for the interruption, my skin
prickling with love for the humid night, love
for my heartsick vegetarian,
who build a funeral pyre for a peacock, then
smelled the flesh and ate
the thing down to its fragile
skeleton—love waiting for love's
apparition to appear in her nightshirt and say
come down before you break your neck, all
that endless arguing and I can't
remember what sent me nowhere
you could see from a silo, foolish

one, her voice disintegrating
into beerglass fireworks over pissed-off
coons, frightened and careening
into brush, the sparking sunrise
end of my cigarette sailing after them as I
say don't come back but if you do
I've got two little twisttop darlings left,
one for the bad guy of your dreams, one
for you if you can catch it.

DAVID BOTTOMS

THE GUITAR

Alone on a hill above the festival, I listen past field noise
to the single bird note humming
off the prongs of a metal fork, and twist the keys
of my guitar, flat then sharper, trying to pull
all loose tension into line, to rest each bronze string
on the one clean level of sound all musicians strive for.

Then across the hill walks a fiddler coming from another jam
his bow pointing me out in the dark, his fiddle
fluttering under his chin, *Bill Cheatum*
already bridging the distance between us.

How long before his ear, pitched to those bright true notes,
brings to his face the blank disappointment of the moon,
and he saws the tune short,
walks off toward the field, the notes rising like sparks
around the campfires?

And these nights when you come home late from work
or whatever, still highstrung
and restless, and already turned in
I'm a case of insomnia, each sorry fret buzzing in my head,
or if by chance asleep, awakened
by your little torches of sound, the low opera
of a late-night movie, the click of your lighter—

How long do I lie in that room, waiting for a footfall,
the bright run of bracelets,
wondering how a night could be as wide as a field,
and why, when you lie down beside me, both of us silent,
I wonder again at the guitar, how anything studied so long
could suddenly go strange in my hand?

ON THE WILLOW BRANCH

Now the pond is still and the softest paddle stroke eases
the boat into the cove. Over the floating stars
you drift, the water settles around you.

The eyes widen as the body remembers,
the stars flare over the pines.
Down cove the tree frogs line their favorite hymns
and the wood drake listens.
At your fingertips the water strider performs
his nightly miracle.

Then a branch above the jon boat rustles like breath
and you look up. Nothing,
then the rustle again, and you shine the light.

Red eyes spark on the willow leaves,
flare, selfless,
and suddenly you're ashamed of your loneliness.

The wind gusts hard on the pond, and the branch sways
out of your beam. The jon boat tosses
easy in the wave-slap, and the old brain clings
to the spine.

THE RESURRECTION

I'd dared her to go in, and we came on that dare
to the road above Rose Hill Cemetery,
and sat for a moment in the cab of my truck,
quiet, not talking, looking down
at the valley of stones, the bone white
testaments prickling the hills.
All the way out she talked of death, her desire
to be cremated, have her ashes scattered
over Lake Rabun. In the new life she'd return
as a swan or a dove. What did I say?
That I believed in the new life too,
the resurrection of the body, and though I knew
the Lord could mend us ash by ash
I wasn't the sort to put Him to the trouble.
So I wasn't afraid, we were as different
as East and West, and the night was still cool,
not quite the season to fall in love
with the wrong woman. And if she was afraid
of anything, she didn't show it, only took
the flashlight off the seat, zipped her parka.
A bright half moon, white as marble, hung
over the river, and I followed her
in that light as she edged through the trees
down the hill toward the gardens,
toward the creek, the row of bricked vaults.
I'd dared her to go in. Not into the graveyard,
but into a grave I knew lay open in the side
of a ridge, an old haunt, reputed hangout
of a witches' coven. And I wasn't afraid
until I stopped where the rock garden
bridges the creek, and the wind off the river
seemed the breath of the dead, or whatever
inside me was dying. *Let's go*, she said,
and pointed up the ridge where I had pointed
to the grave, and we followed the creek
up the valley, past the wrought iron fences
and chairs, the patios and bedrooms

of the dead, without talking, without touching
or ever having touched, until we came
to the end of the valley, the black mouth
gaping behind branches. She knelt then
by the tree and shined the light—
wine bottles, a sardine can, stubs of iron bars
jagging those jaws with rusty teeth—
and with only a slight shiver against the cold,
we crawled into that belly of earth.
And what had I really expected to find? A pit
of beer cans, a clay chamber of dry roots?
Or that stir in the sudden falling of dark,
like the brush of a cobweb against an ear,
like the silky crawl of the first hungry worm,
the gentlest touch,
the first delicate laying on of hands?

CHRISTOPHER BUCKLEY

WALKING OUT THE APPIAN WAY PAST THE CIRCUS OF MAXENTIUS

If remembering another life
you find yourself familiar with the trees,
and the old road opens with shadows
lifting into the azure haze and heat
out-distancing the traffic's charivari,
then these arches will break off
mid-sky, like letters in a fragment
wholly untranslated by the blue.

And then the very cloud-shaped pine
your Latin text opened to
over half a life ago,
and flame-tipped cypresses
green beyond the eternal
dismay and undoing of the air
hold themselves along the way
almost in conjugation, as if someone
had just stood up to say, *amo*, *amas*, *amat*.

And you continue on for hours,
for that old love and its ruin
in statues on the roadside tombs—
the missing hand held out
in invitation or salute,
the elegance of an arm
raised toward an auspicious bird.

And one young man whose features are fair
despite the detractions of the wind and days
greets you, as if from a Patrician box
overlooking the games, and, with good will,
another points the way into the world's bad heart,

unaware of the hour's decline,
the failing of an empire
and the blood.
And their eyes,
oblique as evening clouds, stare down
the road where dust softens
the vacant hum of light,
and so could as easily gaze
upon the trees of Paradise
as on these burnished pines,
yet look for all the world
as if there is still a little
something to be desired.

EVENING IN SANTORINI

Above here, there must be a swath of souls
wide and invisibly blue as this water,
and at evening I think they must drift through
the soft pinks and ambers of light,
still dreaming, and confuse their lives
with this one, as if some ash were still
swimming in the violet arc and afterglow—

for again, sitting out above the bay
after dinner and the delicate, straw-colored wine,
twilight thickens, falls and filters out
as auburn as the skin of deer and fisherboys
Minoans left in frescoes on the walls.

Then, the dim taverna sparks with something
like clarinets and mandolins, an old melody
resonant and tenuous as joy; then the few birds
make no excuse for abandoning the trees,

and the young in one another's arms
take slight notice of this rich failing

of the light, or the old turning home in it
from the stony fields, hunkered from cutting
the clear grapes grown low and away from wind.

And once more I dreamed my body floating
hawk-like in its ease above the agate shores,
banking on thin air as the horizon roiled
in flame at the ocean's far end.
But when
you gaze up the sheer and volcanic cliffs
to villages ridged on the crater's lip
they seem no more than snow at an unknown height,
and a switchback toward them from the harbor
spirals like Dante's 50 rings, a whirlwind
of dust smoking upward from the quarried sand—

and so these are the candle ends of the lost
Atlantis and the first world, a legion of dead
vaguely shining beyond any dead we know,
these winding walls and cave-like homes
brushed with clouds and keeping their secrets
as they ascend hand over hand up the air.

Yet, if you climb the one plateau you'll see
them, white as sea-foam, wash away into a curve
of sea rising bluely to the bluer sky for stars
that spill out and glimmer back and forth between
the surface here and whatever surface there.

LAWRENCE RAAB

LOOKING AT PICTURES

A narrow path snaking along the cliff's edge,
that cold garden with its clipped hedges
and heavy flowers, even the cottage in the forest
—our car by the gate, you somewhere inside—
don't look enough like the places
where we were, although these pictures
are the proof we turn to
and show our friends. This is a good one,
I say—clear blue light and the mist dividing
hillside from hillside, so the eye
moves slowly upward to that castle
or church, at the center. And this
is the village where we lived for a week.
This is the house by the sea.
Then another duplicate cliff and sweep
of water, black flecks of birds like flaws
in an inch of sky, and the wind bending things down.
It became a sweet joke: all those ancient rocks
and the sea crashing against them.
Sometimes you are standing on the pathway,
sometimes there is only the landscape we came for,
my eye squinting into the viewfinder,
then the definite snap of the shutter.
I kept imagining how it all
would appear later, and what I'd find
myself remembering—the pressure each day
of merely looking, the desire to have felt
more than I would feel?
Or perhaps that was later, and as we walked
on a little further that afternoon
we were talking about the weather, or where
to buy groceries for the weekend, a newspaper,
a map, the ordinary details, the brief

consistent present, which is always lost.
I held up the camera.
The real wind pulled at my arms.
Waves were sweeping across the channel.

AT EVENING

At first everything reminded us of you.
We couldn't help remembering, wanting
to talk about it together. We understood
this was the way grief works
to return us to ourselves—no discoveries
or revelations, just the old stories
full of incident and detail.

Then your death grew quieter,
a suspicion the world would always seem
vaguely wrong, as when turning a corner
we recognize someone who isn't there.
Or when a storm, pushed up for hours
against the mountains, swerves off
and only the ordinary afternoon remains.

Six years now: marking the time
season by season. So we say without thinking
of the first warm days of spring: "Like last year."
And when we decorate the tree: "Last Christmas . . ."
Left out, you move further away,
no longer even the image of yourself
but an idea of absence, sad and abstract.

Around the house you never saw us living in
the ragged music of the crows does not
remind me of what you might have said.
It's summer, the heavy peonies shredding
out onto the grass. And at evening

the light is dense and delicate,
the mountains arranged in a purity of blue
tier after tier. So that a sense

of comfort begins to include me,
without acknowledgment. A last crow
clatters back into the pines.
One by one: fireflies, stars.
So many flickering emblems—and this stillness
in which remembering might not be an obligation.
You would know what I mean,
you would have known what I mean.

CLOUD, CASTLE, LAKE

After a story by Vladimir Nabokov

Quietly, concealing himself in his own shadow,
he followed the shore and came to a kind of inn.
Beyond it lay the blue lake, the black
parapets of a castle, and a single cloud
set also in the center of the water.

Amazed, he knew at once the promise
of that happiness which had always eluded him.
A small room for travellers was available—
red floors, the simple bed and bureau,
a mirror full of yellow flowers from the wallpaper,

and a window framing the lake
and its cloud and castle.
There was so little of his life
to change, it would not be difficult
(he decided in a moment) to resign,

and send for the few possessions he wanted—
books and a blue suit, a photograph

of the woman he had loved quite hopelessly
for the past seven years.
"I shall take it for the rest of my life,"

he said, although even then he could hear
from the far side of the lake
the cries of his fellow travellers.
They would be marching toward him,
because no one could be left behind.

And he would be made to join them
and sing the songs of the other travellers.
This tranquil scene, like such words as
"for the rest of my life," would be cast aside
and trampled underfoot, in their pleasure.

Before that afternoon he had seen glimpses
and he knew, as you must know,
how many landscapes summon us
as we pass in a train, for example,
with no hope of stopping or of turning back.

The blue dampness of a ravine.
A memory of love, disguised as a meadow.
Presented, and quickly taken back.
So unfairly, so predictably. Which was,
upon his return, all that he could tell me.

ROBLEY WILSON, JR.

HANGING CURTAINS

Variations on a Theme of Tolstoy

I

Every husband knows
the bareness of a room
with nothing at the windows:
appetites are too plain,
the partners brazen,
and the eyes looking in
increasingly amazed.

To love in a new house
is to seem to furnish it
—the carpets first,
certain upholstered pieces,
sentimental bric-a-brac,
the curtains last of all.

But nothing is hidden.
Under the rugs: floorboards.
Behind the sofa: walls.
On the other side of curtains
the light is hard
and dust-motes idle in it.

By night the partners
pretend it is pleasure
they give each other.
The husband knows: the curtains
hold warmth neither in nor out,
and they hold the years
neither in nor out.

2

Falling, he sees
the curtains are askew.

The ladder represents
ambition, perhaps,
or children on whose concern
he ought to be borne
past middle age,
or only a way toward love.

If he does not get up,
climb the rungs,
adjust the new curtains,
someone may spy in.

What is the answer to the eyes?

It is to climb chairbacks
when you have no ladder;
to put curtains up
and take them down;
to move continuously
into new houses, new rooms
where the floorboards curl
and the window glass
ripples like water.

3

The husband dreams.

He is in a room
stripped of its furnishings,
lying on a thin mattress,
staring up at the window.

The white curtains
are an angel on a ladder
leaned against the wind.

On the far side of the glass:
darkness.
The angel raises the sash
to its widest opening
and the dark flows inside.

The dreamer puts up his hand;
the darkness rises
to his elbow, to his wrist.

He tries to reach the ladder.
He wishes the angel to take his hand.
He hopes he will float on the dark
over the windowsill,
and he imagines he will seize
the curtains on the way past.

He believes
he will catch the angel
on the way past.

SUNDAY AT THE SHORE

We sit by the sea. I tell you
how I am absorbed in the women
squatting on blankets in the sun.
You laugh at me, as if the women
were nothing to you. At noon,
at the time of day most bleak
because shadowless, we swelter
on the sand and idly converse
about lunch or one final swim.

Most of the women are mothers.
I try to imagine them younger,
childless—not even married,
perhaps. Then they were slimmer,
were not embarrassed on the beach
(looking at men, sullen, annoyed
because the men are not watching),
were at ease with what they wore.

It is odd, I try to tell you,
how we are filled with affection
for things dying: a pleasure
perverse as parting from friends
we know we will never see again.
I try to explain to you—how
a man stares at tired mothers
and covets the maidens he sees.

What is it lies at the center
of the life we lead? I say,
and you scarcely listen, it is
to love everyone we can,
even to be promiscuous
if we learn no satisfaction
from fidelity; that it is
a sin to be celibate. I say
the very body that covered you
last night is a different flesh

than you will support tonight.
I say, sprinkling white sand
the tanned length of your arms,
body is all kinds of vehicle
laden with the usual freight.
The destinations are changeless:
where the mind lives, places
tracks lead to in both of us,
dingy warehouses piling up
our heavy sexual commerce.

I must go on to explain
how in the first strange moment
of arrival at this beach
beauty was all around me—
not of the mothers fretful
over their children, nor green
water, lit by the white buoys
and the white bathing caps,
nor of the dimmed horizons,

but of what among my thoughts
is *déjà vu*, this fixed circle
comprising color and youth,
earth and water and clear air,
this composed world gardening
the steamy flowers of desire.
I announce you this vision,
as commonplace as the heat
rippling upward from the sand.

It is, you think, a distortion
inappropriate to Nature,
but Nature too, in her own
shapes is transient. Tomorrow
we will come back and lie
on the coarse humid sugar
of this shore. Will you admit
nothing is quite familiar?
Nothing is exactly the same?

Tomorrow. Meanwhile we sit
without eating, hour on hour,
dry-lunged, fat with boredom.
The sun closes its circle
and the swimmers call softly.
Like brooding yellow willows
all the mothers are lovely
with the love brimming my mind,
hunched over drowsy infants
to give a pretense of shade.

DAVID BAKER

SUNBATHING

My neighbor's new store-bought dog yaps again,
hungry, crazy with heat, maybe both,
stretching his short chain until he chokes.
The little dab of sunshine I lay down in
has drifted away, into the shrubs,
but I'm not budging. *I'm surely dying!*
my cruel neighbor's pup keeps yelping
and, so help me, I suppose he is,

his poor dog's life ticking away like my own.
I guess I'll stay right here in the cool shade
and let him cry for us both—our sad,
single bodies, our chains and our bones,
all burning down to ash and grime
quickly enough on their own, sweet time.

LYNDA HULL

INSECT LIFE OF FLORIDA

In those days I thought their endless thrum
was the great wheel that turned the days, the nights.
In the throats of hibiscus and oleander

I'd see them clustered yellow, blue, their shells
enamelled hard as the sky before the rain.
All that summer, my second, from city

to city my young father drove the black coupe
through humid mornings I'd wake to like fever
parcelled between luggage and sample goods.

Afternoons, showers drummed the roof,
my parents silent for hours. Even then I knew
something of love was cruel, was distant.

Mother leaned over the seat to me, the orchid
Father'd pinned in her hair shrivelled
to a purple fist. A necklace of shells

coiled her throat, moving a little as she
murmured of alligators that float the rivers
able to swallow a child whole, of mosquitoes

whose bite would make you sleep a thousand years.
And always the trance of blacktop shimmering
through swamps with names like incantations—

Okeefenokee, where Father held my hand
and pointed to an egret's flight unfolding
white above swampreeds that sang with insects

until I was lost, until I was part
  of the singing, their thousand wings gauze
    on my body, tatooing my skin.

Father rocked me later by the sea,
  the motel balcony, singing Calypso
    with the Jamaican radio. The lyrics

a net over the sea, its lesson
  of desire and repetition. Lizards flashed
    over his shoes, over the rail

where the citronella burned merging our
  shadows—Father's face floating over mine
    in the black changing sound

of night, the enormous Florida night,
  metallic with cicadas, musical
    and dangerous as the human heart.

CHINESE NEW YEAR

The dragon is in the street dancing beneath windows
pasted with colored squares, past the man
who leans into the phone booth's red pagoda, past
crates of doves & roosters veiled

until dawn. Fireworks complicate the streets
with sulphur as people exchange gold
& silver foil, money to appease ghosts
who linger, needy even in death. I am

almost invisible. Hands could pass through me
effortlessly. This is how it is
to be so alien that my name falls from me, grows
untranslatable as the shop signs,

the odors of ginseng & black fungus that idle
in the stairwell, the corridor where
the doors are blue mouths ajar. Hands
gesture in the smoke, the partial moon

of a face. For hours the soft numeric click
of Mah-Jongg tiles drifts
down the hallway where languid Mai trails
her musk of sex & narcotics.

There is no grief in this, only the old year
consuming itself, the door knob blazing
in my hand beneath the light bulb's electric jewel.
Between voices & fireworks

wind works the bricks to dust—*hush, hush*—
no language I want to learn. I can touch
the sill worn by hands I'll never know
in this room with its low table

where I brew chrysanthemum tea. The sign
for Jade Palace sheds green corollas

on the floor. It's dangerous to stand here
  in the chastening glow, darkening carefully

my eyes in the mirror with the gulf of the rest
  of my life widening away from me, waiting
for the man I married to pass beneath
  the sign of the building, to climb

the five flights & say his Chinese name for me.
  He'll rise up out of the puzzling streets
where men pass bottles of rice liquor, where
  the new year is liquor, the black bottle

the whole district is waiting for, like
  some benevolent arrest—the moment
when men & women turn to each other & dissolve
  each bad bet, every sly mischance,

the dalliance of hands. They turn in lamplight
  the way I turn now. Wai Min is in the doorway.
He brings fish. He brings lotus root.
  He brings me ghost money.

ALEDA SHIRLEY

FINDING THE ROOM

For months I would wake you up
and tell you how my father marked the walls
of his studio with the four cardinal points
and filled the rooms
with skyscapes and seascapes;
how it was years
before I knew how small the house was.
I couldn't let go,
not then: my window opened onto an aquarium
where the fins of tropical fish fluttered
like crepe. My mother's
was the mirror
at her dressing table, lit
with crystal flasks. There she sat,
while I played role after role, trying them on
as if they were dresses. When

I looked in her mirror, I saw dozens
of girls spinning there:
such shimmering choices. Petrarch imagined
an architecture of memory
where images were stored in places
of fitting size. I kept
my father's planes and my first glimpse
of the sea in a meadow
of white grass. The angry voices I heard
one New Year's Eve
in the broken pieces of ceiling
on the top floor of a warehouse.
I bent over and dropped the tea roses
I wore in my hair into night held
by the reservoir.
But that was not the end of it. When recently,

at a party, someone asked where
I'd grown up, I didn't tell him about
the fragrance of oranges in the glass garden,
the stiff silver shrubs,
the stone barge on the edge of the bay.
I turned around and spotted you,
across the room,
staring at sycamores through the French doors.
You told me a pearl
was hidden under my tongue and, as evening emerged
from the trees in its many shapes,
I removed the pearl
and thought of how, in Japanese prints,
a girl pulls from her mouth the hair
she's stuffed there
to mute the sound of pleasure or pain.

SUNSET GRAND COUTURIER

You've called to say you're on your way;
I'm outside, picking zinnias for the table. The children
two houses down shoot
free throws and the ball
sounds like slow, steady applause for the mild evening,
the possibilities in the blue air.
Wittgenstein imagined someone pointing to a place
in the iris of a Rembrandt
and saying, "The walls in my room should be painted
this color." And why not?
What if I scooped up the air around me and demanded
a dress the color of dusk?
Would that be vanity?
I am wearing such a dress,
for you. The threads that glint in the weave
are fireflies flickering in the apple trees;

the sheen on the collar the bells at Vespers
from the church on Peterson Hill;
the splotches of scarlet along the hem
the first sumac hedging the sky.
Does the dress mean I want you to pass
your wrists completely
through me, deeper
than the choir of tongues, the many hands,
that have touched me in the past? to merge
with no seam, like water into water, daylight
into dusk? Or, more simply, is it
a desire for that union
each of us loses
in the first months of life
when the soft sunlight on our cheeks
and mother and milk are one thing? Imagine:

the mourning doves, as they begin to grieve,
can fly right through me
and, in bones suddenly hollow,
I feel the urge
to go south, the urge to return.
If rain falls, I can pass into the yellow window
flaring on a dark street
and find you
sitting in a corner chair, the candlelight
bouncing inside hurricane globes.
You touch my hair with warm dry hands
and my dress turns the color
of a cello, seasoned
for years in Italian sunlight,
of the room behind the half-open door
the girl in the painting peered through.

L'IVRESSE DES GRANDES PROFONDEURS

For a while, the colors distracted her from thought
of home; at a depth of fifteen feet, red
turned pink; further on it was black,
then disappeared. That first winter she killed
time counting the sheets and table linens,
designing a centerpiece of shells.
Our noticing them is what puts things in a room
and her rearrangements pleased him; he saw what
surrounded him for the first time in years.
The air tasted like pennies. She swallowed hard
as she realized love had only so many fingers:
his, on all the buttons down the back
of her dress. Looking up she saw footsteps, rings
in the trees, rows of windows brimming
with other people's secrets. Once these things
would have meant possibility, brochures
of desire fluttering toward her. Now,
drunk with the rapture of the great depths,
she's forgotten sunlight and goodbye are
options; at any given moment she feels unaccountably
lucky, as someone might on a day the first
characteristic weather of a season breaks through
and one red convertible after another passes
by on the freeway. Night is the destination
that lures her, ambience the one element in which
she feels at home. Snow falls on the outside
of the year and the lens of the sky, gritty
with North African sand and volçanic dust, reddens
the moon. She imagines the invisible lips
that would appear if she powdered a pane from one
of those windows. Yet how can she call
this suffering? She is at home. The dark fills up
with invitations. Deception matters
less and less as she learns the difference
between it and truth; lying requires a reason.
His is to have her with him, to grow inured
to her presence. She desires to be touched,
on all sides at the same time.

MILLER WILLIAMS

THE AGING ACTRESS SEES HERSELF A STARLET ON THE LATE SHOW

For centuries only painters, poets and sculptors
had to live with what they did as children.
Those who trod the boards—I love that—
said their first stumbling lines into air.
Some do still, but most of us who are known
and loved for being people we are not
have reels and reels of old film unrolling
behind us nearly as far as we can remember.
We drag it everywhere. How would you like
your first time doing something to keep repeating
for everyone to look at all your life?

How would you like someone who used to be you
fifty years ago coming into this room?
How would you like it, never being able
to grow old all together, to have yourself
from different times of your life, running around?

How would you like never being able
to stop moving, always to be somewhere
walking, crying, kissing, slamming a door?
You can feel it, millions of images moving;
no matter how small or disguised, you get tired.
How would you like never being able
completely, really, to die? I love that.

TEARING DOWN THE HOTEL

They are tearing down the oldest hotel
in Spring Lake, New Jersey. People sat here

in wicker chairs, reading Henry James,
when women wore long dresses and high shoes
and talked to men in hard straw hats and blazers
of motorcars and Egypt. Out of their sight,
men with large hands and unbreakable words
complained to women who never slept enough.

People came here when men in medicine wagons
sold bottles of dark elixir to women who waited
in small, fictitious towns, in houses with fringes,
rocking upstairs for days, the last drop gone.

Cars and aeroplanes and moving pictures,
adventures of goggles and boots, made here once
a surety as bright as a pale wine
caught by candlelight and nearly as brief.
Then they died, but that was different, too.
They died knowing that love by vulgar love,
barring only the yawn of a God grown bored,
eternal generations would bloom above them.

When the structure someone supposes here
to take the place of this hollow hotel
is pulled apart, say a hundred years,
someone will say, maybe, thinking of us:
they were like this and that, read such and such;
they talked of these matters in those old chairs;
they never quite believed that we would be here
recalling the dead, pulling their buildings down.

ON A TRAILWAYS BUS A MAN WHO HOLDS HIS HEAD STRANGELY SPEAKS TO THE SEAT BESIDE HIM

I brought a book to make the time pass.
It's nothing but another boring thriller.
The people in it, they don't like it, either.

We're going to change the whole thing around.
You ought to read it when we get it done.

It's hard to be in a book, living a life
somebody else made up, doing things
you don't like to do, starting your life
halfway through a meal, or driving to work.
Also sometimes the print is very small.

So, anyway, if the girl across the aisle
should brush her hair back, like this, or smile
in such a way as says she wants attention,
I wish that you would trade places with her.
I have more attention than most people.

I can give her any amount she wants.
Not that it will change much for me.
I've got the only future I'm going to have.
But bless me, Lord, I could have been born
somewhere else where no one speaks English.

There are places that even those that live there
never heard of, places with dictators
that force democracy on everybody
and people are poor and dumb and ride donkeys.
Lord love us all, we don't know what we do.

I needed so much to do something well
after yesterday and the day before,
I thanked a woman twice and kissed her hand
because she said I was a perfect stranger.
People have loved and left and no one remembers.

The window here could be a clock, Lord love us,
the way the fields fly by. Sometimes I pray
to be here for whatever happens next
and hope that if it's good it happens twice
or lasts a long time.

ED OCHESTER

HAVING BUILT THE COOP

for centuries I have been forced
to sleepwalk on these roads of decay
d. a. levy,
"The North American Book of the Dead"

I put the chickens in and they swivel
their necks, tentative, suspicious,
their merciless unblinking eyes
reminders that they descended
from reptiles, though these are loveable
as they coo and cluck and their behinds
wiggle as they settle down to turn
the tiny compound into a mud flat
and then don't even try to escape,
though the grass they love is growing
luxuriantly a few inches beyond
the woven wire fence, because the coop
is home and from my point of view
I want their eggs in one place
even though it's the nature of chickens
insofar as one can talk about "nature"
to be pecking through a broad universe
of an acre or more, and I suppose
the moral, if there is a "moral,"
is what levy said: it's all illusion,
but you may as well follow your own
as the illusions of others—though the chickens
don't care, the chickens cackle over some
culled spinach they adore and a handful
of cracked corn and cluck "this is
the best place in the world" though
of course they haven't been to any other
because they're in a cage but that's ok,

they don't live too long and they're
never going to read Thucydides or
hit many good restaurants, they
are there to work, and it amazes me
how intelligent levy was for someone
who died at 23 but still understood
that "everyone pays their dues
& no one's gettin' the product"
though that was twenty years back
and none of the chickens are complaining
this June as the invisible cicadas sing
derrida · *derrida* · *derrida*

JOSEPHINE JACOBSEN

THE PRESENCES

I. THE CREATURES

Here they are common as pebbles. Tree-
frog; cat, lizard. I have been near them
today. This morning the cat, which is yellow,
trotted along the path through the pineapple palms.

When the sun was at an angle, the lizard
espaliered against the wall's stucco, stayed
like that for minutes on end—his head
a little raised, his tail fading to nothing:

and later, by a small flashlight, I found
in its axil the tree-frog, big as a thumb,
green as green glass, pulsing with sound
so shrill it split night's membrane like a shard.

I could have touched him. It was the same date
in history for all of us, the same acre,
the same air of spice and salt: here we were.
I do not comprehend outer space

but it is smaller, I know, than this distance
between us, this mystery we carry.
(I have seen a lioness trot like a cat,
light, light, with the tail's tip up,

I have seen the lizard's eighth cousin
rise on its alligator joints, onto tippytoes
and run fast as a dog.) But those were
in places strange to me. Here, we cohabit,

the cat trots, the lizard clings to the wall,
the frog slits the silence. Close,
close, distance makes me dizzy
with its sumptuous refusals.

Galaxies are simpler. There is an awful grace
in so much mystery. To have such disguises
as we circle each other: on a path,
on pink stucco; in the crotch of green.

II. THE CLOUDS

What must be said of clouds is: they are silent.
Their silence is flawless. They move
with irregular edges over the vast backdrop

steadily; or, at a moment, swiftly. A sound
would destroy that thick fleece, the puffed
and sailing curves going fast and silent.

I have seen them from above, but felt
no closer; they never promised support.
Those turreted fields are not for you.

When they tear almost imperceptibly
apart, the quiet is immense and the fila-
ments disperse and atomize.

Stained by the moon, a copper
fringe drags off the whole affair
and the moon glares round and bright

but the clouds go on away, pile white
over star over star. Release star after star.
I don't know any other affair so quiet.

When I lie flat on the ground I can feel
the stillness pass over my face. It softens
the gravestones and darkens flower faces.

Death is equally silent but does not move.
I think a good thing to see before the quiet that is
motionless, would be the bright soundless motion.

This silence fills the ear like another music.
It appeases. How much time in which to be
grateful is roughly sufficient?

GREGORY DJANIKIAN

CLOUDS

It was a test on clouds, Science 1,
Seventh grade, Mrs. Snyder, who,
I remember, always wore dark colors.
My fingers trembled, I couldn't keep
A point on my pencil, and in the next row,
John Carlson was getting all the answers.
Cumulus, altostratus, cirrus.

What was I dreaming of? Clouds.
They reminded me of Iowa or Kansas,
Or my notion of them, expanses of wheat,
Big skies somewhere west of where I was,
Somewhere with rural addresses, dogs
Named "Blue" or "Jake," and railroad crossings,
And a boy's river lazing through farm and pasture.

Cirrus fibratus, cirrus uncinus,
Altocumulus, cumulus congestus

I was losing time, my answer sheet
Was white as a cloud, and there was
A scratching of pencils on paper.
What was I after? Summer. A hillside.
A cumulus sky driven by the breezes.
Kites, and kite string humming in the air.
Shouts, laughter, in the distance only.

Cumulus humilis, cumulus fractus

Time was up and we were let go
And I reeled out to the playground lightened.
There was the bluest sky and I saw
Fibrous wisps converging into grey.

"Cirrus spissatus," John Carlson announced
From behind me, maybe to himself,
And skipped away at ease with the world.

All the way home, I spat out those names
I'd learned one by one, cirrostratus nebulosus,
Altocumulus undulatus, cirrocumulus, cumulonimbus,
Until I was left with just "cloud,"
Something vague and inexact, but prevailing,
Like some notion of happiness,
Or longings without name.

GRANDMOTHER'S RUGS

Alexandria, 1953

My father was unrolling rugs,
They were all finding their places
After a summer's storage,
The red Kashan in the hallway,
The blue prayer rug in the parlor.

My grandmother was talking.
"Vacuum cleaners," she was saying,
"They have them in America.
I've seen squirrels too. Snow.
Electric irons, the land
Is full of electricity."

The house was becoming quiet
And taking on color, my heels
Were sinking into the soft
Understory of wool.

"Rugs," she said. "In America,
The leaves in autumn turn
To the color of rugs."

I imagined the wonder of leaves
Textured like wool, the smell
Of naphthalene around every tree.

All day I walked from room to room,
From one rug to another,
"They are beautiful," my grandmother said,
"Tekkes, Baluchis, Turkistans."

But all I could think of was America,
And streets of squirrels and snow
And trees shedding color.

I walked on electric reds and purples
Thinking they were leaves,
The ceilings were a sky with bountiful light,
The windows gave way to sparks and grids of power.
"Rugs," my grandmother said.

But I was too far gone. Where was I?
Somewhere my longing had flung me,
Somewhere private and serious and new
Where there would always be,
No matter the passage of years,
A hum of wires, a crackle of leaves.

GARY SOTO

THE SEVENTIETH YEAR

They say you want to die.
What is it?
The hair on an arm
Leaning toward the shadows?

Sun-Maid is gone, Grandpa.
The machinery is fleeced in rust.
Though the loading dock
Holds the rains of many years—
Sweat that fell
And opened into momentary coins—
There is no more work.
You can sleep now.
Sunlight enters the house,
dust drifts in a galaxy
Of unmapped stars.
And Grandma? She is well—
Her veins no longer surfacing
Under a blue flesh.
She's with you now
And the warmth you smell
Is her nightly presence.
Get up and eat, Grandpa.
Your skin has yellowed.
Look at the back yard garden—
Already the flower beds
Brim with summer weeds
And ants unravel
From their dark holes in the trees.
Come to the kitchen.
It is warm there, Grandpa,
And your family, the little ones

With their cards of Get Well,
Has gathered like a small cloud,
Like the steam weeping
On the window.

HEAVEN

They say that it's not at all white,
That the freeze going up
Is momentary,

Then the full rememberance:
The alley with its morning fog,
Father, piping soup
On the stove's blue rings.
Then the *and* and *and* of a child's first years.

Maybe you sit in a chair.
Maybe earth is far below.
The string that ties you to that place
Is just a waver,
Spider skein two thousand years down.

Or maybe the new home is much closer,
Just above the trees,
A sea howl at the window
—or you're those hangers banging
Quietly when the closet door opens.

Conjectures. Little clues,
Really. But we're hopeful that we'll wake.
The chair is for us. The sorting
Of days is done on our fingers.

Lost boot, first girl,
Scar on the chin with its pink hook.

COMMENT

THE POETRY OF DEREK WALCOTT

Collected Poems: 1948–1984, by Derek Walcott. Farrar, Straus, & Giroux. $25.00.

It may seem audacious for a young poet to liken his situation to that of St. John on Patmos receiving revelation, yet Derek Walcott's early poem "As John to Patmos" is an *ars poetica* and a written vow. This early (the poem was written when the poet was in his twenties) he expresses his sacred sense of vocation and his moral and aesthetic commitment to his native realm—his island, St. Lucia, and the entire Caribbean archipelago: "So I shall voyage no more from home; / may I speak here. / This island is heaven." After evoking the island's almost mystical landscape, he consecrates his need "To praise lovelong, the living and the brown dead." While the early poems included in *Collected Poems* are more modest in their intentions and less complex in their metaphorical richness than what will follow, there is still a remarkable maturity and confidence in them. (It is astonishing to realize that "Prelude" was written by a poet in his teens.) These poems allow us to see the young poet developing the idiom and grappling with the problems that will come to define his life's work and his distinctive sensibility.

Derek Walcott's *Collected Poems: 1948–1984* is a large selected poems of over 500 pages and includes work from all of his books, beginning with *In a Green Night: Poems 1948–1960*, which was first published in England by Jonathan Cape in 1962. Because 1948 marks the public beginning of Walcott's career (his first book, *25 Poems*, was published in that year), this new collection enables the reader to gain a sense of this major poet's growth and evolution. And, because all of his books prior to *Sea Grapes* (1976) are out of print, *Collected Poems* makes available the entirety of Walcott's book-length poem, *Another Life* (1973), and many other important poems from the first half of his career.

The poems from his early books, *In a Green Light*, *Selected Poems* (1964), and *The Castaway and Other Poems* (1965) reveal his mystic sense of place and a lush imagination which is always poised against a high eloquence. In an extraordinary early poem, "Origins," he is already able to create a language that can contain one of his major concerns—the creation myth of his native place. His ability to discover the sources of a hitherto unnamed place puts him in the company of the lyrical epic poets of the Western hemisphere, especially Whitman and Neruda. Walcott's Adamic ability to embody rhythmically and metaphorically the natural history of his world and transform it into culture-making language is what Emerson called Naming in the highest poetic fashion. "Origins" is a prologue to poems like "The Sea Is History," "Schooner *Flight*," "The Star-Apple Kingdom," "Sainte Lucie," and his book-length epic, *Another Life*. In "Origins," as in these later poems, Walcott is able to find in the cosmogonic conditions of his landscape a protean identity as a man and an epic consciousness for his culture. The warm Caribbean waters become an amniotic bath for this poet whose memory encompasses, at once, phylogeny and ontogeny. "In my warm, malarial bush-bath, / The wet leaves leeched to my flesh. An infant Moses, / I dreamed of dying, I saw / Paradise as columns of lilies and wheat-headed angels." Out of the Proustian remembrances of his childhood and his deeper racial memory comes a force of imagination in a surging rhythm that defines what he refers to as "the mind, among sea-wrack, see[ing] its mythopoetic coast":

> *O clear, brown tongue of the sun-warmed, sun-wooded Troumassee*
> *of laundresses and old leaves, and wind that buried their old*
> *songs in archives of bamboo and wild plantain, their white sails*
> *bleached and beaten on dry stone, the handkerchiefs of adieux*
> *and ba-bye! O sea, leaving your villages of cracked mud. . . .*

The selections from *In a Green Night* (1962) show us Walcott's various formal virtuosities. His rhyming quatrains of iambic tetrameter in poems like "Pocomania" and "In a Green Night," or his sonnet sequence, "Tales of the Islands," reveal his ability to mine traditional forms of English poetry without ever compromising his passionate energy or his language's inner music. One senses that the vestiges of form are in the deeper structures of so many of Walcott's later freer poems. For example, the inner cohesion of the lyrical epic, *Another Life*, is in part created by the delicate balance between Walcott's eruptive imagination and the harnessing control of his tradition-bound intellect.

Other poems from the 1962 collection, such as "A Far Cry from Africa," "Ruins of a Great House," "Two Poems on the Passing of an Empire," show Walcott beginning to wrestle with the complex identity that will unfold in his later books—his irreconcilable and pluralistic cultural situation as a transplanted African in a colonial English society. Perhaps he sums up his life's dilemma when he cries out at the close of "A Far Cry from Africa":

> I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
> Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
> I who have cursed
> The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
> Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?
> Betray them both, or give back what they give?
> How can I face such slaughter and be cool?
> How can I turn from Africa and live?

For his ability to embrace his Black West Indian identity and to accept, with the ingenuity of an artist, the language of his inherited culture accounts for much of the genius and richness of his idiom. Using the English tongue he loves does not preclude his moral outrage at the crimes that the Empire has committed against his people. He hears in the mansion of English culture a death-rattle in each room. In "Ruins of a Great House" he sees clearly "Hawkins, Walter Raleigh, Drake, / [as] Ancestral murderers and poets," and confesses that his "eyes burned from the ashen prose of Donne." Knowing his love affair with English literature, one senses the complexity of Walcott's mind.

For the most part the poems from *The Gulf* (1970) are more personal than the earlier work and bear the imprint of some of Lowell's tone and mood in *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead.* Travelling between the West Indies and the States, Walcott has acquired a new sense of North-South tension. With his Juvenalian eye, he observes another empire in the midst of its internal conflicts and violence. In the title poem, a flight over Texas provokes his vision of America as "detached, divided states, whose slaughter / darkens each summer now, as one by one, / the smoke of bursting ghettos clouds the glass." In "Elegy," written on the night of Robert Kennedy's assassination, Walcott's sober view of America ends with his recasting of that famous American couple of Grant Wood's "American Gothic": they stand "like Calvin's saints, waspish, pragmatic, poor, / gripping the devil's pitchfork / stare[ing] rigidly towards the immortal wheat."

In *The Gulf* and *The Castaway and Other Poems* (1965), Walcott's luxuriant images and tropes have become so rooted in his nature—

in his pathological relationship to the world—that sight and insight, sensory perception and metaphorical meaning merge. In "The Flock," a stunning poem that opens *The Castaway*, his reflection on the imagination and the creative process begins with an image of birds migrating south: "The grip of winter tightening, its thinned / volleys of blue-wing teal and mallard fly / from the longbows of reeds bent by the wind, / arrows of yearning for our different sky." Before the poem is over the birds have become part of the imagination's topography without ever losing their naturalistic authenticity—natural fact and metaphor remain one.

Another Life (1972), written between 1965 and 1972, is an extraordinary leap forward in the evolution of Walcott's work. He has, in this poem of four books and twenty-three sections, "sung," in the epic meaning of the word, a life's story into a mythic journey. Beginning the poem in the middle of his life's journey, he exclaims near the end of the poem, "a man lives half of life / the second half is memory." And the memory in this poem is that of a collective mind and an intimately personal one. The texture, color, tone of the poet's childhood on St. Lucia and his rites of initiation into manhood and art are matched by a language so rich and sensuous that one feels in it that rare balance between the personal life and the fully metaphorical meaning of that life. Consequently, the poem is balanced between its narrative elements—the people, places, and events that have shaped the poet's life (his mother's house, the local townsfolk who become his heroes, his soul-mate the drunken painter Gregorias, his discovery of his history, his metaphorical marriage)—and the lyrical transfigurations of those elements. The poem is at once a paen to the culture of his island and the history of the Caribbean and a dramatization of the morphology of the poet's mind. In his double culture and his divided self, he sees the music of language, the basis of metaphor, and the moral meaning of poetry. For all of the immensely cultured intellect in this poem (I cannot think of a poet who uses the history of Western painting as brilliantly as he does here), there is never anything effete or rarified in the Stevensian sense. He has managed to do what a modern epic poet must do: encompass history, myth, culture, and the personal life with the realm of aesthetic vision. Some of these passages illustrate what I mean.

His sacramental sense of culture, landscape, and history:

> At every first communion, the moon
> would lend her lace to a barefooted town
> christened, married, and buried in borrowed white,

> in fretwork borders of carpenter's Gothic,
> in mansard bonnets, pleated jalousies,
> when, with her laces laid aside,
> she was a servant, her sign
> a dry park of disconsolate palms, like brooms,
> planted by the seventh Edward, Prince of Wales . . . .

In his love celebration, the blood of nature becomes the blood of sacrament:

> And a vein opened in the earth,
> its drops congealing into plum,
> sorrel, and berry,
> the year bleeding again, Noel, Noel,
> blood for the bloodless birth,
> blood deepening the poinsettia's Roman blades
> after the Festival of the Innocents.

The Historical burden of his people:

> The bones of our Hebraic faith were scattered
> over such a desert, burnt and brackened gorse,
> their war was over, it had not been
> the formal tapestry bled white by decorum,
> it had infected language,
> *gloria Dei* and the glory of
> the Jacobean Bible were the same. The shoes
> of cherubs piled in pyramids
> outside the Aryan ovens.

The exuberant drunkenness of the young poet and his painter friend:

> while the black, black-sweatered, horn-soled fisherman drank
> their l'absinthe in sand back yards standing up,
> on the clear beer of sunrise,
> on cheap, tannic Canaries muscatel,
> on glue, on linseed oil, on kerosene,
> as Van Gogh's shadow rippling cornfield,
> on Cezanne's boots grinding the stones of Aix
> to shales of slate, ochre, and Vigie blue,
> on Gauguin's hand shaking the gin-coloured dew

from the umbrella yams,
garrulous, all day, sun-struck . . . .

Sea Grapes (1976) is in certain obvious ways a quieter and more austere book. After the outpouring of the long poem, it is as if Walcott were forced to retreat in order to examine the troubles of his present life. Poems like "Sea Grapes," "Fist," "Winding Up," and "Love After Love" deal with the tensions between the passionate life of love and poetry and his responsibilities to his domestic life and his solitary self. Nevertheless, the one long poem, "Sainte Lucie," shows us that he is never too far from his tribal self. This five-part poem, which is a kind of psalm to his island, is a mixture of French Creole and even a Creole song, touches of a vernacular speech, and Walcott's inimitable eloquence. In a way the poem looks forward to the continuing epic impulse that defines *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (1979).

Coming to *The Star-Apple Kingdom* after the poems that have preceded it, one becomes aware not only of Walcott's genius but of his stature as a major poet. His ability to renew himself, to revitalize his imagination, to rediscover the myth of his life and his culture, places him among the greatest poets of our century—Yeats, Neruda, Rilke, Williams, Elytis, for example—poets who write out of their obsessions without repeating themselves. Two of his most powerful poems, "The Schooner *Flight*" and "The Star-Apple Kingdom," reveal Walcott's seemingly inexhaustable resources. In "The Schooner *Flight*," he unites beautifully a vernacular tradition with his high eloquence so that the reader believes that his persona, Shabine, is both a common man and a speaker of poetry. Shabine, who is trying to escape the woes of his life by fleeing his island as a castaway, is able to sustain a tone that is both autobiographical and mythic. "I'm just a red nigger who love the sea, / I had a sound colonial education, / I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me, / and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation." He becomes a kind of underwater Isaiah whose vision encompasses his people's history. He sees what it was to be a "colonial nigger," and as the rhythms of the sea provoke Shabine's inner eye ("I had no nation . . . but the imagination"), he relives the Middle Passage, sees the corruption of the imperialist businessman and ministers, and as an angry prophet cries out: "I shall scatter your lives like a handful of sand, / I who have no weapon but poetry and / the lances of palms and the sea's shining shield!"

The language of the title poem, which is set in Jamaica, is able to hold in tension the pastoral munificence of the colonial world and its morally rotten underpinnings:

Strange, that the rancour of hatred hid in that dream
of slow rivers and lily-like parasols, in snaps
of fine old colonial families, curled at the edge
not from age or from fire or the chemicals, no, not at all,
but because, off at its edges, innocently excluded
stood the groom, the cattle boy, the housemaid, the gardeners,
the tenants, the good Negroes down in the village,
their mouths in the locked jaw of a silent scream.

As he recounts the history of the Caribbean, he sees the islands as beads on the rosary—and through this ingenious sacramental conceit he leads us back into history (the Conquistadors, "the empires of tobacco, sugar, and bananas," "the footbath of dictators, Trujillo, Machado," "the alphabet soup of CIA, PNP, OPEC"). But, as so often happens in Walcott's poems, the journey into the darkness of history enables him to validate his identity as a West Indian Black man so that he can "sleep the sleep that wipes out history" and envision, once again, another version of Genesis—what becomes for him almost an imaginative ritual allowing him to reclaim his people's strength. He imagines his "history-orphaned islands" from Cuba to Tobago as turtles coupling, and finds the history of his race in one black woman who sees "the creak of light" that divided the world between "rich and poor," "North and South," "black and white," "between two Americas," as she hears the transcendent silence of the beginning in the "white, silent roar / of the old water wheel in the star-apple kingdom."

Since the ten poems in *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (only eight are reprinted here) comprise a sustained book-length poem, it would seem hard to surpass such an effort in a short period of time. However, *The Fortunate Traveler* (1981) is again a surge forward—another poetic renewal. The book shows Walcott's various selves: an exiled poet writing with ambivalent passion about the North, the Augustan satirist writing in a comic vernacular in "The Spoiler's Return," and the elegist enlarging his familiar theme of exile into a modern vision.

In one of the magnificent poems of the collection, "North and South," the poet confesses his identity as a "colonial upstart at the end of an empire, / a single, circling, homeless satellite." He becomes a modern exiled poet with a global vision of what empire means as he hears "its gutteral death rattle in the shoal / of the legions' withdrawing roar, from the raj, / from the Reich, and see[s] the full moon again / like a white flag rising over Fort Charlotte." Like Ellison's Invisible Man or Wright's Bigger Thomas, Walcott finds himself a deracinated Black man wandering through the snowy surreal white streets of the urban North (Manhattan). He is enervated by how far he is from the "salt freshness" of his "raw" culture, and tired of the decadence of America and Europe with its "literature . . . an old couch stuffed with fleas." As the poem shifts to a winter Virginia landscape (amplifying the double meaning of North and South), the poet identifies himself as a slave, and as he imagines that a blue-eyed, red-haired aunt of his might be part Jewish, he makes a pact with all the oppressed peoples of the world and would rather have "the privilege / to be yet another of the races they fear and hate / instead of one of the haters and the afraid."

He extends this human empathy even further in the title poem. His self-effacing and poignant use of the famous refrain of St. Paul in Corinthians, "*and have not charity*," is the poem's hymning refrain; it serves as a benediction and an admonition. The poem is borne out of the poet's painful sense of the fissure between the need for a religious ethos and the absence of any moral order in our time. With his savage wit he recasts history so that "After Dachau" supplants "Anno Domini." As he contemplates the 10,000,000 people starving on the earth and the 765,000 skeletons in Somalia, that horseman of the apocalypse—famine—"the leather-helmed locust" stalks his imagination. The beast that Yeats saw "slouching toward Bethlehem" is now among us as Walcott looks at the twentieth century to see "The heart of darkness is the core of fire / in the white center of the holocaust." The poem reminds us of the meaning of *caritas* and the fact that all reform must begin in the human heart. For all the moral advocacy in this poem, Walcott never strays from the richness of his metaphor or collapses his poetic eloquence for the sake of a message. This is the kind of political poem that only a master can write.

The *Collected Poems* concludes with a selection of thirty poems from his most recent book, *Midsummer* (1984). The collection is comprised of fifty-four short lyric poems, which in their diary-like tone give the sense of a poet charting his preoccupations during the course of a year. Since the collection is a kind of book-length poem, I wish the entire book had been republished. In a certain sense, this is Walcott's most American book (although its personal tone is always ballasted by his sumptuous imagination). Here, he appears more at home in his exile, a cosmopolitan poet absorbing the pulse of many cultures; he exclaims "this is the lot of all wanderers, this is their fate, / that the more they wander, the more the world grows wide." He becomes the poet as ethnographer and we see him in the pensiones, hotels, motels, and inns of Rome, New York, Warwickshire, Boston, and even having a nightmarish vision of nuclear winter in Chicago. He has also found a more personal idiom for writing about one of his passions—painting.

His lyrical ruminations on Watteau, Gaughin, Van Gogh, and Chardin show us how Walcott's rich imagination continues to be informed by texture, tone, gradation of color, hard and soft lines, and shifting perspectives—and how much the art of Gregorias's friend is a love-affair with the world. In concluding, it is fitting to mention Walcott's love poems. For they are as full-bodied, erotic, compassionate, personal and mythic at once, as any love poems written in English in this century. "Bleeker Street, Summer," "Goats and Monkeys," the epithalamion in *Another Life*, "Egypt, Tobago," "Europa," and the astounding poem about his still-born daughter, "Early Pompeian," are poems that embody another dimension of *caritas*.

It is difficult to think of a poet in our century who—without ever betraying his native sources—has so organically assimilated the evolution of English literature from the Renaissance to the present, who has absorbed the Classical and Judeo-Christian past, and who has mined the history of Western painting as Walcott has. Throughout his entire body of work he has managed to hold in balance his passionate moral concerns with the ideal of art. By his fifty-fifth year Derek Walcott has made his culture, history, and sociology into a myth for our age and into an epic song that has already taken its place in the history of Western literature.

PETER BALAKIAN

CONTRIBUTORS

JENNIFER ATKINSON won *Sonora Review*'s 1985 poetry award, and has recently completed a collection of poems, titled *Nor Wishes*. She is a student in Iowa City.

RAYMOND CARVER's collection *Where Water Comes Together With Other Water* was recently issued in paperback by Vintage. Random House will publish his new book of poems, *Ultramarine*, in September.

ROGER WEINGARTEN received an Ingram Merrill award for 1985, and last fall he read at the One World Poetry Festival in Amsterdam. David Godine will bring out his new book, *Shadow Shadow*, in August; the title poem first appeared here.

DAVID BOTTOMS was the Richard Hugo Writer-in-Resident at the University of Montana this spring. His third book of poems, *Under the Vulture-Tree*, is forthcoming from Morrow early in 1987.

CHRISTOPHER BUCKLEY's *Other Lives* was published by Ithaca House last year. Last month, Vanderbilt University Press issued his new volume, *Dust Light, Leaves*; in May Pentagram also brought out a fine print, limited edition of his *Blossoms & Bones: On the Life and Work of Georgia O'Keeffe*.

LAWRENCE RAAB's books include *Mysteries of the Horizon* and *The Collector of Cold Weather*. This fall, Carnegie-Mellon will publish his *Other Children*; over a third of the poems included in the new book first appeared in these pages.

ROBLEY WILSON, JR. has fiction forthcoming in *TriQuarterly*, *Twilight Zone Magazine*, and *Sewanee Review*. He teaches at the University of Northern Iowa, where he edits *The North American Review*.

DAVID BAKER* took his doctorate from the University of Utah and is an assistant professor of English at Denison University. His work has appeared in *American Scholar*, *NER/BLQ*, and in The *Kenyon*, *Southern*, *Sewanee*, and *North American* Reviews, as well as in a number of recent anthologies. He was awarded an N.E.A. Fellowship for 1985–86.

LYNDA HULL* holds degrees from the University of Arkansas and Johns Hopkins, and is currently a counselor and assistant instructor of writing at Indiana University. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Tendril*, *MSS*, and *The North American Review*; November will see the publication of her first book, *Ghost Money*, which won this year's Juniper Prize.

ALEDA SHIRLEY has contributed to many literary journals and is in her first year of the M.F.A. program at Indiana University. Her first book, *Chinese Architecture*, will come out in September from the University of Georgia Press; several of the poems therein made first appearances here.

MILLER WILLIAMS's most recent books are *The Boys on Their Bony Mules*, poems, and *Sonnets of Giuseppe Belli*, translations from the Romanesco. He has two volumes forthcoming, *Imperfect Love* (poems) and *Patterns of Poetry: An Encyclopedia of Forms*. He is director of the University of Arkansas Press.

ED OCHESTER's most recent book is *Weehawken Ferry* (Juniper, 1985). He teaches at the University of Pittsburgh, where he recently resumed his duties as director of the Writing Program. He also serves on the Board of Directors of the Associated Writing Programs (1985–88).

JOSEPHINE JACOBSEN has new work in *Prairie Schooner*, *13th Moon*, *Ontario Review*, *TriQuarterly*, and *New Letters*. A former Consultant in Poetry at The Library of Congress, she lives in Baltimore.

GREGORY DJANIKIAN has appeared in several literary and scholarly journals; his first book, *The Man in the Middle*, was issued by Carnegie-Mellon in 1984. He teaches at the University of Pennsylvania.

GARY SOTO's several books include *Black Hair* (poems) and *Living Up the Street* (prose); his most recent is entitled *Small Faces*, a collection of personal essays published in March by Arte Publico/University of Houston. He teaches at Berkeley.

PETER BALAKIAN's third book of poems, *Reply from Wilderness Island*, will be issued by Sheep Meadow Press next year. He teaches at Colgate.

*First appearance in *Poetry*.

NEWS NOTES

Five poets were included among the recipients of the 1986 awards of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Gregory Corso was given the $5,000 Jean Stein Award; Kenneth Koch, the $5,000 Award of Merit Medal for Poetry; Philip Whalen, the $2,500 Morton Dauwen Zabel Award; and C. D. Wright, the $1,500 Witter Bynner Prize for Poetry. Richard Kenney received the Rome Fellowship, which includes a year's stay at the American Academy in Rome. ♋ Chris Llewellyn won the $1,000 1986 Walt Whitman Award of the Academy of American Poets for her first book of poems, *Fragments from the Fire*, to be published by Viking Penguin. Maxine Kumin was the judge. ♋ William Arrowsmith is the winner of the $1,000 Harold Morton Landon Translation Award, sponsored by the Academy of American Poets. W. S. Merwin selected Mr. Arrowsmith's translation of Eugenio Montale's *The Storm and Other Things* (W. W. Norton). ♋ Patricia Dobler won the 1986 Brittingham Prize in Poetry co-sponsored by the University of Wisconsin Press and the University of Wisconsin English Department. Her collection of poems, *Talking to Strangers*, was selected for the $500 prize by Maxine Kumin and will be published by the University of Wisconsin Press. ♋ William Mishler and Roger Greenwald are the winners of the second Richard Wilbur Award for their translation of *Stone Fences: a book from the inner townships from childhood in the fifties*, by Paal-Helge Haugen. The prize is co-sponsored by the American Literary Translators Association and the University of Missouri Press, which will publish the winning manuscript. ♋ James Merrill has been named the first Poet Laureate of the State of Connecticut.

BOOKS RECEIVED

VERSE

A Circle of Sirens, by Mark Ameen. Sea Horse Press (New York City). $6.95.

Ode to the Chinaberry Tree and Other Poems, by James Applewhite. Louisiana State University Press. $13.95 cloth; $6.95 paper.

Collected Poems, by Ursula Bethell. Ed. by Vincent O'Sullivan. Oxford University Press. $14.95.

Terms To Be Met, by George Bradley. Yale University Press. $12.95 cloth; $6.95 paper.

The House of August, by E. G. Burrows. Ithaca House. $6.00.

The Book of Nods, by Jim Carroll. Penguin Books. $18.95 cloth; $7.95 paper.

The Book of Alna: A Narrative of the Mormon Wars, by Turner Cassity. Robert L. Barth (Florence, KY). $7.50.

Hurricane Lamp, by Turner Cassity. University of Chicago Press. $15.00 cloth; $6.95 paper.

Einstein's Brain, by Richard Cecil. University of Utah Press. $7.95.

Against the Cold, by Humphrey Clucas. Robert L. Barth. $4.00.

After Kalinga and Other Poems, by Akil Contractor. Asia Publishers & Distributors. No price listed.

Spirit Song Verses, by Akil Contractor. Asia Publishers & Distributors. No price listed.

February 29th, by William Corbett. Pig Press (Durham). $3.50.

Schedule Rhapsody, by William Corbett. Pig Press. £1.90.

Memories, by Robert Creeley. Pig Press. $5.00.

Broken Lines, by Soheyl Dahi. Sore Dove Publishers. $5.95.

Hippolytus Temporizes: A Play in Three Acts, by H. D. Black Swan Books (Redding Ridge, CT). $20.00.

Thasos and Ohio: Poems & Translations 1950–1980, by Guy Davenport. North Point Press. $14.95.

Local Time, by Stephen Dunn. William Morrow. $14.95 cloth; $6.95 paper.

Victims of the Latest Dance Craze, by Cornelius Eady. Ommation Press (Chicago). $18.00 cloth; $8.00 paper.

Nightvision, by George Evans. Pig Press. $6.50.

Helen, by Euripides. Tr. by Robert Emmet Meagher. University of Massachusetts Press. $20.00 cloth; $8.95 paper.

Underbrush, by Francis Fike. Robert L. Barth. $4.00.

When It Comes to Bugs, by Aileen Fisher. Harper & Row. $11.95.

Between the Gulfs, by John Finlay. Robert L. Barth. $5.00.

Offering: Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke & Paul Verlaine, tr. by Bernhard Frank. Goldengrove Press (Buffalo, NY). $5.00.

Kochan, by Jack Gilbert. Tamarack Editions (Syracuse, NY). No price listed.

School of Names, by M. B. Goffstein. Harper & Row. $11.95.

Monster Masks, by Lee Harwood. Pig Press. $7.50.

Progress, Dancing, by Ann Hayes. Robert L. Barth. $4.00.

Selected Poems, by Zbigniew Herbert. Tr. by Czeslaw Milosz and Peter Dale Scott. Ecco Press. $7.50.

Best Friends, ed. by Lee Bennett Hopkins. Harper & Row. $11.50.

After I'm Dead, Will My Life Begin?, by James Humphrey. Poets Alive! Press (Harrisburg, NC). $8.50.

Lasting Relations, by Rudy Kikel. Sea Horse Press. $5.95.

Meadowlark West, by Philip Lamantia. City Lights. $12.95 cloth; $4.95 paper.

Selected Poems, 1935–1985, by James Laughlin. City Lights Books. $9.95.
Honey & Ashes, by Stephen Lewandowski. Tamarack. $5.00.
Tap Dancing for Big Mom, by Roseann Lloyd. New Rivers Press. $4.50.
Stars Principal, by J. D. McClatchy. Macmillan/Collier. $16.95 cloth; $9.95 paper.
A Roman in Cologne, by Matthew Mead. Satis (Edinburgh, Scotland). No price listed.
Millenary, by Raeburn Miller. New Orleans Poetry Journal Press Book. $6.00.
Unattainable Earth, by Czeslaw Milosz. Tr. by the author and Robert Hass. Ecco Press. $17.50.
Flash Paper, by Theresa Pappas. New Rivers Press. $4.50.
The Floating World: Selected Poems 1973–1982, by Alasdair Paterson. Pig Press. $7.00.
Hard Labor: Poems, by Cesare Pavese. Tr. by William Arrowsmith. Bi-lingual text. Johns Hopkins University Press. $9.50.
What Dillinger Meant to Me, by Robert Peters. Sea Horse Press. $5.95.
Window Elegies, by Felice Picano. The Close-Grip Press (Tuscaloosa, AL). $40.00 cloth; $25.00 paper.
Spiritus, I, by Carl Rakosi. Pig Press. $6.50.
The Complete Poems of Christina Rosetti: A Variorum Edition, Volume II, ed. by R. W. Crump. Louisiana State University Press. No price listed.
Portraits and Elegies, by Gjertrud Schnackenberg. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $6.95.
The Lamplit Answer, by Gjertrud Schnackenberg. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $6.95.
The Golden Gate, by Vikram Seth. Random House. $17.95.
The Walls of Thebes, by David R. Slavitt. Louisiana State University Press. $13.95 cloth; $6.95 paper.
Roosevelt Unbound, by R. T. Smith. Tamarack Editions. $2.50.
The Drifting Away, by Leon Stokesbury. University of Arkansas Press. No price listed.
Final Approach, by Roderick Townley. Countryman Press (Woodstock, VT). $7.95.
Transfigured Autumn, by Georg Trakl. Tr. by Allen Hoey. Tamarack Editions. $5.00.
Gaining Definition, by Michael Vince. Robert L. Barth. $4.00.
Writing Home, by Hugo Williams. Oxford University Press. $6.95.
The Tuft of Primroses, *With Other Late Poems for* The Recluse, by William Wordsworth. Ed. by Joseph F. Kishel. Cornell University Press. $42.50.

PROSE

Twelve Below Zero, by Anthony Bukowski. New Rivers Press. $7.00.
Chicano Poetry: A Critical Introduction, by Cordelia Candelaria. Greenwood Press. $35.00.
Wallace Stevens: The Critical Heritage, ed. by Charles Doyle. Routledge & Kegan Paul. $39.95.
A Poetry of Presence: The Writing of William Carlos Williams, by Bernard Duffey. University of Wisconsin Press. $23.75.
Selected Letters, by Wilfred Owen. Ed. by John Bell. Oxford University Press. $7.95.
The Poetry of the Forties in Britain, by A. T. Tolley. Carleton University Press. $24.95.
All Manner of Monks, by Benet Tvedten. New Rivers Press. $6.00.
Guido Gezelle: Flemish Poet-Priest, by Hermine J. van Nuis. Greenwood Press. $29.95.
The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats, Volume I, 1865–1895. Ed. by John Kelly and Eric Domville. Oxford University Press. $29.95.

VERSE AND PROSE COMBINED

The Butterfly Tree: An Anthology of Black Writing from the Upper Midwest, ed. by Conrad Balfour. New Rivers Press. $7.50.

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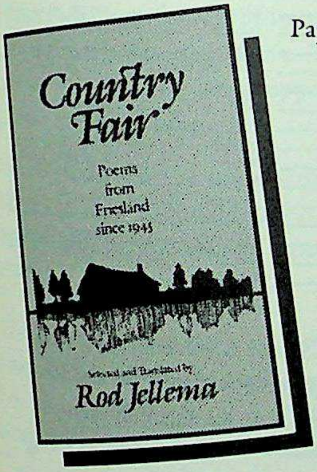

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POETRY

JULY 1986

MAXINE KUMIN

ON READING AN OLD BAEDEKER IN SCHLOSS LEOPOLDSKRON

Salzburg, Austria

Soft as beetpulp, the cover
of this ancient Baedeker.
The gold print has scabbed off the leather
but thirty-three tissue paper maps extend
from Vienna to Bosnia. One
of my grandfathers is in here somewhere
living in three rooms over his tailor
shop on the Judengasse in Salzburg or
Prague, stitching up frockcoats on Jew
Alley in Pilsen, or in the mews
of Vienna's Old Quarter,
my mother's loyal obsequious *Opa*
tugging his forelock whenever
the name of Franz Joseph is spoken.

In this edition you can still travel
by diligence down from Bad Ischl
to Hallstatt, where grottoes full of bones
of early Celt miners have been uncovered.
Whole families journey to see them

cycling single file, observing the caution
to keep to the left "because in
whatever part of the Empire you meet them,
troops on the march, sized by height
and moving smartly, always keep right."

Not for you, *Opa*, this tourist attraction,
punts lapping the stone-green lake in
the hanging valley of Hallstatt,
languorous voices hovering
adrift in dappled sunlight
and the lionel-toy train tunneling
out of its papier-mâché mountain
to pause at the cardboard station
where day trippers, disembarking,
may visit the fake antique ruin,
a mossed-over stucco *folly*.
Time to shoulder your knapsack
and strike out for Ellis Island.
Kiss your nine sisters and never look back.

Never look back, Grandfather.
Don't catch my eye on this marble
staircase as wide as the 'gasse
you lived in. Don't look at the chandeliers
that shone on the Nazi gauleiter
who moved in and made this headquarters.
Here in the cavernous Great Hall
I look for some thin line of comfort
that binds us, some weight-bearing bridge

and finally walk out in rain
to fling stale rolls to the swans
in their ninetieth generation.

THE FESTUNG, SALZBURG

I shall have to pee out the window, says the translation
in the 1902 pocket phrasebook Alastair's
grandfather gave him. Also, *Call the hostler!*
and *Here are my boots*, meaning polish them
but nothing that helps decipher life in this fortress
four hundred years ago, all cobble and cannon,
all ice storms and armor and horses. How, for example,
did they haul water for livestock and people?
Out of what reservoir make time for
carving twelve marble apostles and a Christ
that are tucked in a chapel chipped from the rock
of the scarp that commands the Salzach?
No idiom to tell us how secure
this Festung was before war took the air.

Down in the candybox town we dawdle
at Tomaselli's over cups of hot chocolate.
I pretend I have come back here for the sake
of my forebears, come back out of exile
to reinvent how it was for them,
seeking among the faces that pass
those as old as I, those few with missing
limbs, or sightless, who endured the Anschluss,
seeking among the dirndls and lederhosen
the unknowable middleaged ones who risked the ovens
and came through stained with a deep understanding.
Bitte, bitte schön. Ropes of rain
fall on a sea of purposeful umbrellas
in calm green homogeneous Austria.

NIGHT LAUNCH

Canaveral Seashore National Park

Full moon. Everyone in silhouette
graying just this side of color as we wait:
babies in snuglis, toddlers from whose clutches
ancient blankets depend, adults encumbered
with necklaces of cameras, binoculars.
A city of people gathered on the beach.
Expectant boats jockeying offshore.

When we were kids we used to race
reciting *the seething sea ceaseth;*
thus the sea sufficeth us
and then collapse with laughter, never
having seen the rise-and-fall of ocean,
the lip of foam like seven-minute icing,
moon-pricked dots of plankton skittering.

The horizon opens, floods with daybreak,
a rosy sunrise as out of sync
as those you fly into crossing the Atlantic,
midnight behind you, the bald sky blank,
and up comes the shuttle, one costly Roman candle,
orange, silent, trailing as its rockets fall
away a complicated snake of vapor.

Along the beach a feeble cheer.
Muffled thumps of blastoff, long after,
roll like funeral drums, precise and grave.
We are the last to leave.
Driving back along the asphalt, signed
every hundred yards "Evacuation Route"
past honeycombs of concrete condominiums

I remember how we wrapped and carried
our children out to a suburban backyard
to see Sputnik cross the North Temperate Zone

at two in the morning, and how we shivered
watching that unwinking little light
move east without apparent cause.
On this warm seacoast tonight
in the false dawn my neckhairs rose.
Danger flew up to uncertain small applause.

"PRIMITIVISM" EXHIBIT

Museum of Modern Art, 1984

In spite of admonitions not
to loose my psyche in this primal landscape
I get off on the wrong foot
misread Ibibio as libido
then must duck so as not to scrape
the Soul-catcher's noose of hanging O's.

Worse, there's God A'a, whose maggoty people
I take as a lesson in fleshcreep.
At the site of umbilicus, nipples
eyes, ears, nose, chin
hips and kneecaps
cling clay Lilliputians

upside down and sideways.
Leeches fasten like this in stagnant ponds
but nobody knows what the statue meant to say.
Maybe it was a frozen happening,
an art event on Rurutu Island.
Maybe a second, or 32nd, coming.

Longest I look at the dread
dog fetish, whose spiky back
is built of rusty razorblades
that World War II GI's let drop
on atolls in the South Pacific
they were securing from the Japs

who did not shave, but only plucked
stray hairs from chin and jowl.
I like the way he makes a funk-
y art out of cosmetic junk
standing the cutting edge of old steel
up straight to say, *World, get off my back.*

A CALLING

Over my desk Georgia O'Keeffe says
I have no theories to offer and then
takes refuge in the disembodied
third person singular: *One works*
I suppose because it is the most
interesting thing one knows to do.
O Georgia! Sashaying between
first base and shortstop as it were
drawing up a list of all the things
one imagines one has to do . . .
You get the garden planted. You
take the dog to the vet. You
certainly have to do the shopping.

Syntax, like sex, is intimate.
One doesn't lightly leap from person
to person. *The painting*, you said,
is like a thread that runs
through all the reasons for all the other
things that make one's life.
O awkward invisible third person,
come out, stand up, be heard!
Poetry is like farming. It's
a calling, it needs constancy,
the deep woods drumming of the grouse,
and long life, like Georgia's, who
is talking to one, talking to me,
talking to you.

MARIE BORROFF

UNDERSTANDING POETRY

Death be not proud . . . How proud we were, how tough,
You my arch-poet, I your paraphrase!
Our pyrotechnics set their wits ablaze:
Logic, trope, scheme, theme, structure, all that stuff.
I met them, matched them, made them call my bluff;
We thrashed it out, rehashed it forty ways;
Strutting that little scene, I played for praise
And won my share—oh yes, I had enough.

Death be not proud . . . When did the clapping stop?
Standing in that still house, remembering how
We sojourned there in joy, the joy that was,
I hear, Jack Donne, beneath your razzmatazz,
A quieter music. "If it be not now,
Yet it will come." Teach that, or shut up shop.

JAMES COLE

FACULTY OFFICES, CIRCA 1985

The young scholars inhabit these offices
but they're seriously ill, you'd think,
in view of the machines required
with big cords and consoles and screens,
lengths of paper chugging out into the light—

intensive care units, these offices,
with their high tech sounds and no smoking;
high tech but curiously primitive,
like Model T's or sewing machines or Linotypes,
some more like a rusty Morse code—

but the young scholars who jog and lift weights
are running the machines almost invisibly,
old books at the tips of their fingers,
old books sneaking a cigarette
and wanting, one whispered, to be left alone—

wanting to be old and difficult as always,
wanting no outside consultants
or CAT scan or extraordinary means;
old books wanting some iodine for a cut finger,
old books wanting the old bedside manner.

DAVID KELLER

THE APPLICANTS FOR THE CORRESPONDENCE COURSE

Like a tour group come for a visit,
I take the envelopes up to my room
for a small welcome, to let them know
where they have turned up at last,
the new arrivals at a summer campfire
or first seance where each will have
its chance to tell all.

Oh, do not ask who.
Few have bodies, some no names.
This one has published nearly a thousand poems
he claims; and at the bottom of each page
in his glossy booklet stands the author's name,
Ezra Pound, then "(but really me)"
following an asterisk, scrawled in.

A lone passerby buttonholed
by strangers, I am ill at ease.
One woman has sent me her collection
of odd words strung together,
out of a world nearly matching this one
in a picture colored by some child
with its green sky and magenta trees.

What can I offer any of them?
Here is the young man in love
with how the blood's poor motorcycle
carries him at night. Is this the way
events surprise the heiress in a movie,
back from a nervous breakdown, whose husband
is out to drive her mad for the insurance?

After a while even the addresses
seem slightly wrong, invented, an alibi
left in a corner of each page.
The poem's calling card,
they are the tiny rooms the self hides in
rehearsing events for which I could obtain
the first American serial rights, one hints.

Wives, retirees, older students,
when the time's up, I sort them into piles:
loves me, loves me not, waiting
to hear from me, one says, eagerly,
something already lost in translation
and a stamped, enclosed envelope.

TOM DISCH

THE DOT ON THE i

They mean so much, these little things:
The way as it sinks into lower-case
The aristocratic I loses its
Ionic capital to wear the unassuming
Livery that it alone of all the letters
Must be humbled by. Yet it is wise in that
By doing so it intimates of what Pope hints at
When he speaks of mankind's middling state
Between the macro- and the microscopic—
An idea too easily dismissed as out-of-date,
As though the only units of time worth noticing
Were those with the eternal rondures
Of our O's. But what is this O but
A dot with a hole in it? Wherein
Other dots may blossom into other O's,
A rose of infinite regressions like
The marvelous Mandelbrot transformations
Illustrated so beguilingly in a recent
Scientific American. When it comes to the sense
Of beauty we are all Pythagoreans,
Transfixed upon the ineffable and inexplicable
Significance of a number; for instance
(Or especially?), *i*, the square root of minus-one.
Or think of "quantum leaps," by which in common usage
We refer to movements of momentous scale
But which in fact are miniscule, beyond the reach
Of measurement. High and low, the infinite
And the inconsiderable, merge in the Arctic
Paradiso, Number, where, you guessed it, Number One
Is the great revolving flywheel generating
All numbers else, except its negation. Think of
It, and think as well of those teeny tiny lovely touches
That so enrich each individual existence:

Peter Seller's telling tics in his role as
Dr. Strangelove, the pepper polka-dotting an egg,
The leg of a dog lifted to piss—all this
And indefinitely more, for it is an aspect
Of the limitless extent of all single particulars
That it includes more than one, than anyone,
Can specify. Just try it. And it is this
Limitlessness of all that is little that allows
A theoretic possibility of a plenum
Coextensive with the mind and reach of each
Man and woman alive, and unalive, of absolutely
Everyone, in a democracy of dust where even the largest
Integer is a function of the number one, and may
Be laid low by *i*. Incredible, isn't it?
I love you, and that's equally incredible,
Equally axiomatic. Shall we stop there,
Or proceed to the next coulisse down the road?
We'll stop there. I love you. That's it.

THE VIEWERS AND THE VIEWED: EURAILPASS VERSES, 1985

1. SCENES OF COMMON LIFE

Amsterdam

With drunken smiles and apple cheeks,
In wide-brimmed hats and ruffs bleached white,
The ancient burghers all concur:
Be rich and of good appetite!—
Advice that these museum-goers
Attend with faces carved from granite,
As though these old Dutch businessmen
Were creatures from another planet
And not the patterns upon which
Their genes were fashioned stitch by stitch.

2. AMONG THE EARLIER GERMAN PAINTERS

Hanover and Munich

Brute rage and cruelty have here full rein,
Where Christs are pierced and whipped and steeped in pain
And endless holy martyrs feel the thrust
Of voyeurism's disembodied lust.
Such (we later viewers apprehend)
Is every felon's destined end
Who raises challenge to the Church or State,
And *would* have been Herr Martin Luther's fate:
A hint that many of today's Bavarians
So heeded they became themselves barbarians
In zesty, zealous imitation of
The blows and bludgeons of the Lord God's love
And now, as henchmen, share immortal blame
For what the German Church and State became.

3. SAAL X

Vienna

Two lions menace us just halfway up
The stairs, where Theseus prepares to club
A centaur: we're entering the realm
Of art and must beware. Here even apples
In the hands of Flemish Eves may pose a threat,
And hell spawns demons right and left. There's worse
To come, and yet with what a cool aplomb
The noble rich who share these rooms look on,
Their eyes fast fixed upon their portraitists.

The worst atrocities are in Saal X:
No Spanish martyrdoms, no flayed Marsyas,
No writhings of the buxom damned, but life
As Pieter Breughel saw it, calm as any
Prince hung on these walls, and not without a sense
Of fun. He'd have enjoyed the constant zaps
Of buzzers triggered by the mesmerized
Museum visitors as they trespass
Beyond the boundaries set by velvet ropes
To grimace at his grim particulars.

TO THE YOUNG MERCENARIES

Soldiers of Fortune, not yet nineteen,
With steel-toed boots and cheeks daubed green,
Don't think we cannot see you through
These camo games of peekaboo.

We do. We see you, but must turn
Our cheeks that otherwise might burn
With conscious shame of having spied,
Approvingly, at homicide,

Go, dear boys, and wash your faces.
Then come back to the emptied places.
See, here's a chair, and here's another,
And here's the corpse of someone's mother.

Why, what a spacious world you've made!
Now, are you clean, and were you paid?
No, I see there still are traces
Of sin and death upon your faces.

Go, wash again, and while you do.
We'll send policemen after you.
The world you've made so spacious we
May now inhabit, peacefully.

WILLIAM HATHAWAY

IN EACH DAY

For Lisa Ress

Orders came, precise, he said,
not to stack them, but you know
how it is. On the planes sometimes
they came piled, but he always laid
them end to end on the carts.
Canvas mummies, always stiff and quite
easy to swing out and down. Planes
often came at dawn when a thin
silver streak seeped up from
where the sea was. When they cut
the engines he sometimes smelled
salt and kelp in the new quiet.
But most often the motors idled
as they checked tags and hauled
bodies out into that sucking howl.
At the center of the roar a constant
whistle rose and fell
like a shriek. And he could not
hear that scream for long, he said,
and not go mad. And he did not.
Sometimes you must handle the dead
like baggage and at another time
cradle one in your arms. Neither time
is good, or bad as you think.
Like looking on the lost children
on this morning's milk carton—
gone so long they would be grown
except you know in someone
somewhere, all the time

drones a sound that can not end.
As the first coffee wound
your stomach tight you did not hear
the birds in the quiet of your thought.
Their steady warble that shakes
each single new day loose
as we ready for our grim business.

TURNER CASSITY

THE AUTOSCOPIC EXPERIENCE

The soul at death looks on the corpse it leaves
And after that dies or is put on hold.
It is a process easy to reduce
To painted birds on stucco walls, or breath
This side a mirror. As abstraction, view
And viewer one to one and poised to part,
Autoscopy is more the mask of gold:
The mummy's backward eye. Or is the gold
More narrowly—need, cost, implied exchange.
Must the eye cover for the heart gone out?
Emotion is investment capital
Like any other; it will be withdrawn.
Free, idle, high potential hovers, soon
To pick its site: another flesh astute
In ways to estimate another flesh,
And by and by a disembodied drive
Eternally in search of search; until,
Outworn by scrutiny, the body counters,
And the soul, the poor hardworking soul,
Having paid through the nose, must leave by it.

INDUCTED

Socialist realism paints the "Tax of Blood"
As Herod at the slaughter of the innocents,
Vast Turks impaling Christian children on their swords,
Ravishing mothers, tearing infants off the breast,
And, in the middle distance, torching granaries.
The burning grain fields are of course a scene generic,
Useful equally for World Wars I and II,
Teutonic Knights at Novgorod, the Japanese
About to starve Port Arthur. As to why these Turks
Should care to burn the possibility of tribute,
Art does not comment. Outside the gallery
Marxism of a local form has done its work
Attractively. The town is bright and circumspect,
If, by the river, obviously Ottoman.
It is provincial irreducibly, its youth,
Unlike the youth of Belgrade, innocent of jeans.
In pairs and trios they carve tree trunks and are bored.
Admit it, tractor artist; neither I nor you
Can carve a true initial in a local wood,
As much as small towns bore us. Take an alias.
Imagine you are me imagining the scene.
Our small wistaria adds blue drops to the water;
In its fragance, gaunt, a Turkish officer,
Itinerant draft board of one, is offered çay
Upon a table-tray. Drawn up in front of him,
Four adolescents and their father. "Tell me which,"
In Bulgar says the Moslem. "I need only one."
"The eldest has good teeth," the father volunteers.
Oedipal conflicts do not have their only site
In Macedonia, the which the officer
Is quite aware, if not exactly in those terms.
That sibling staircase, notes he, has one riser missing.
Is he hidden in a cave, the favorite?
"We do not bite our foe. What of the cloven chin?"
"Left handed, and the youngest knows the tongue of sheep.
I need him for the flocks."

"And at the best of times
You farmers have one son right handed out of three.
Choose. Let the ambidextrous pick among themselves."
He well knows who the pick will be; the cleft of chin
Has winked two times at him, and with his either eye.
"Should you consult your other brother?" says the Turk.

•

A last hill edging all the golden hills of Thrace,
And past it, for a gaunt recruiter, for his troop,
Rise up the ruin of the Land Wall like a scarp,
And like the letters of an unknown alphabet
The minarets and domes lined on the Golden Horn.
A gypsy by the gate is dancing with some bears;
A sherbet seller, massive pitcher on his back,
Is bowing double, to defer, or start the flow.
It will be thirty years before the new recruit,
The new initiate, allows his home a thought,
And he will think then of the blue wistaria
That in the water sheds its days toward Istanbul,
And counts the days of youth, in whom the tax of blood,
So irresistible, is paid and overpaid.

CAROLYNE WRIGHT

POST-REVOLUTIONARY LETTER

After cities full of flashbacks
and bad debts, you send me
a letter from a country
safely out of reach,
your get-even scorecard: Love
or nothing.
Should I wish myself
into your place? You rent a room
above the gun-runners' bar,
fumes of ouzo and kerosene
through floorboards, men in shirtsleeves
hunched over tables in a low room,
their tongues loosened by Molotov
cocktails and the jokes
you can be shot on sight for telling.

You've shuffled a stacked deck,
spend hours dialing area codes
of fallen countries, friends
who've disappeared in unmarked cars
at dawn. You say you want me again
but everything has its price.

Memory lapses,
hands losing their nerve, fingers
pointing to the Keep Out signs,
telling us who to hate.
Were you always in the vanguard,
with a cause you could get strangers
to believe in? Did you wonder
how you got there, when fireworks
strafed the night sky, and amputees
from the last war crawled under benches?

In the duty-free shops, vodka
drops like mercury in the bottles.
Rifles fill the crates marked *Shoes*,
and bribed inspectors whistle
and look out across winter hills.

The years are worn out
by forwarding addresses, everything
I said twisted by your dictum—
Don't Look Back. I put your letter
down. I won't be at the airport
listening to doctored radio reports
and making out with the taxi driver
till you arrive.

Thessaloniki, October 1981

LOVE AFFAIR IN A SMALL TOWN

That was the winter we clung to each other
in a bed that obeyed too well
the laws of gravity, in an apartment
big enough for someone who was always out.
It was Anywhere, USA, and always snowing,
like those Norman Rockwell cards that urged us
to put the Christ back in Christmas.
We X'd ourselves out of the landscape.
How else to silence the tales
boots tell, in a town that only had words

for denial? We were each other's
best-kept secret, as snow drowned out
the traffic, and neighbors trudged by,
scanning mailboxes for names to match
the lights in upstairs windows.
What did we have to hide?

Our old lovers at opposite ends
of the continent, and we answered
the telephone easily as the couple
who sheltered a family

of illegal aliens for years.
We took turns sleeping,
pinning notes to the refrigerator
like a calendar of private references.
You played songs from the days
we believed music had the answers,
and I worked over my books till dawn.
Mornings, you slipped into the chair
behind me, hands under my sweater,
the toy airplane you gave me

doing spins and backflips on the table.
We moved toward each other
as if dreaming the receding last words
of a song. We didn't need anyone
to forgive us for what we learned—
ache of your tongue in my mouth,
the flush under our skin
lingering for hours, love a skill
we were in no hurry to tire of.
We who would never give

ourselves away, in a season
where no one else could have saved us.
We wanted nothing more, we said.
A wind between two seasons,
our real lives miles away inside us.
We weren't looking for other names
or numbers. As the old year
flooded the snowbanks with its on-again
off-again lights, you helped me pack
for a life I couldn't return to.

We never even asked *What next*.

Those last weeks, it seemed the town went on
forever, and we kept looking back at it
as if we would never leave,
as if we were already gone—losing ourselves
under the lowering, perfect sky.
Nothing could have made us
any more or less than what we were,
and we had a whole continent
in which to change our minds.

RETURN TO SEATTLE: BASTILLE DAY

No difference in the gray gulls, sobbing
like women who circled the tumbrels,
scaffold silhouettes of fir.
The same sky lowers over the channel,

the plane follows it down
like a dream, guillotine blade
of sun on water. All of this
for what? Walking the green neighborhoods

with names like gracious women: Madrona,
Magnolia. Rain telling its stories
on the ponds, rainbows fracturing
in oil slicks. How could I go back

to where I first took my age
between my hands like a lover's face
and said, "This far, no farther"?
Then moved from one coastline

to the next, as if I had
no winter and no home? For years
it was easy—nothing to answer
for what went beyond the weather,

too soon to give up on the body
or lose myself in the blue
selectivity of dream.
Now, what stands between me

and the long frontier with winter—
A father, sleepwalking among ohms
and voltmeters, the electric smell
of metal. A brother, face-down

in the soft gray light
of the calculus. A sister,
vanished from the glass house
of her thoughts before anyone

could have grown into her name.
My mother, 1945, stepping from
the Armistice Day prop plane
with her unchanged face,

light off the Cascade rain front
troubling her memory with its danger
years before she could blame
herself for everything.

VICTOR JARA (1938–1973)

Son años pasados, presentes en mí,
Era ya en Santiago, y te conocí. . . .
Isabel Parra

So I'm here again, five feet away
from you, on the makeshift stage
of the Peña de los Parra,
and you're singing *The Right to Live*
in Peace, still in your actor's
leather jacket, embracing your shadow
in the guitar, the darkened room
taking its shape around you.
You tell us of Camilo Torres
and of Amanda—the young woman
who ran through your town's wet streets
to meet her lover, and found him
gunned down at the factory gates.

What do you think of us, students
hunching forward to listen
in the smoky light, glasses
of *vino tinto* beside us, the room
deep and wine-colored, Allende's photo
behind you on the wall? We follow
your lead, singing the choruses over
and over. We stand when you do, chanting
Otra! Otra! till you play another,
the fields of Chile in your voice,
your guitar speaking its human song.

I never talk to you then.
I'm shy as rain in your country,
the language too much yours.
You stand between sets
in the crowded patio, one
among many, those who sing

La Nueva Canción. You're not even
one of my favorites.

Did you know then that shadows
would swallow the back galleries
like memories no one could get used to?
That you'd sleep in shifts
those last days, taking your turns
at the locked gate, the shortwave
radio crackling with surveillance?

You'd refuse the last chance
to destroy the tapes, your songs
filled with those who did what
they had to, lined up against walls
of the Estadio Nacional.
How could you believe it
when the time came, and your voice
grew too big for the cell
where they broke your hands
because they couldn't make you stop?

Once again it's September,
and I sit in this small kitchen
listening to Isabel Parra sing
Como una historia, her lament
for your death. Her voice breaks
in the tape, telling the names
that make nothing easier, our words
that cannot reach you, foghorns
sounding all night on the river
like a story from someone else's life.

GARY MYERS

INVITATION FROM A DECEASED SPANISH POET

If ever you lose your courage
If for some reason you are running away
Look for me at the fountains   I will have smoke in my blood
Or if somehow you don't feel especially brave
You can find me in a gust of silence and emptiness   stretched out upon the sea

I'll know you by your hands
Shoved so deep in your pockets they sleep the sleep of fish
Promise never to look for me under the hat where ideas one after the other are hurled against the nearest star
You won't find me there
Or in the water climbing the villa walls to rescue the dawn

But if you're feeling tired   more tired than the grasses
More tired than the stones
Look for me if you will in the ash stuck to a shoe
For I am one who listens with his hands and feet to the dying rivers
I will be eating roses on the veranda
I'll know you by that hunger
That got hold of your eyes one day while you were laughing
And hardened with your smile

Promise never to look for me after dark
Or where fireflies know nothing about the white fences collapsing under the weight of clouds
Promise never to look there
Or behind the leaf so tired of floating inside me
It holds a timelessness all its own
That is one place I never go

Look instead for a pair of sandals   on the beach by the sea
I won't be far away
But if you're feeling sad
If your bones   your flesh   your hair
Seem tied to a wind that wanders the desert for years without stopping
Look for me there

Where a knife is left at the edge of a cliff
Where a dream of happiness hides its one frail regret
I won't be far away
You have only to wait for a wreath of stars to penetrate the blood dripping against the garden wall
I'll know you by your hat   by your patience with the world
Forever tipped on its axis

ODE TO SLEEP

It is when the heart and the clotted blood betray the word-weary patient
When the tooth of a dead horse terrifies even the man in the castle
And the leaves of trees   knowing their place on the wind
Rattle their dead-waking rattles

It is when earthquakes shake the moon   and from the sleeper's hand
Falls the uninhabitable sphere to roll upon the waves of the sea
That is when I sleep

It is true
There are days when the infected sky climbs onto our brows
Where each thought buries its nameless skull
And the journey of the body is the enticement of clouds to enter a world of vapor and nocturnal stones

That is when the moon comes to rest on the cheek of a
  young girl's face
When every river leaves its bed by night
To seize for itself the low-lying fog
That and to trace for good the lines in a man's face
When they appear as journeys to distant planets
That is when I sleep

And the waves grow warm through exposure to the stars
With the death of each fish a message is sent to another galaxy
Listen
The dead would rise like sleepwalkers in full view of the city
But their graves remind them too much of lifeboats picking
  up time-weary angels
Their graves which open to the sky never stop moving long
  enough to come square with the world

But the sleep of windows moving about at night
Of flesh carrying light to the center of the earth where it
  lives the life of bone and hair
The sleep of water consumed by the soul
That is the sleep that carries us

The endless sleep of the terminally ill
Directing their love toward dead constellations
The perpetual sleep of pyramids pointing to the sky
When kings sick with tedium have disappeared into the walls
When the eyelids have failed to defeat the shadows
And the heart kissed by echoes has turned to dust

ROBERT B. SHAW

SAFE HARBOR

Past midnight, and much darker
than when I hit the pillow,
I heard the channel marker
appraising every billow
whose overweighted crest
collapsed with all the rest.

Its single note, dividing
the shallow from the deep,
took on the task of guiding
me out again toward sleep,
loosing the stubborn painter.
The port lights playing fainter,

it braced me past the bold
breakwater that takes the pulse
of tides in pincer hold,
a final perch for gulls.
It tolled me seaward, till
it too, becalmed, held still

and the unfathomed sea
again made room for me.

KATHERINE SONIAT

LIGHTHOUSE TELEPHONE

You held your hands on my face
when I was four
and blistering with sun, that broken
boat sputtering finally toward home.
You made a breeze with them all afternoon,
said they were like palm trees
near my window, miles ago, in Key West.

Key West had slipped so easily
out of sight, the salt-spray sun
sinking down in orange, twilight
coming upon us in a fishing boat
that would not start. The only sound
was waves slapping
the boatside in the wind.

Then a lighthouse came alive,
like one match struck in the dark
and blown out, then another.
You tied a hatchet to your
scarlet bathingsuit in the starlight
and swam away. The whole Gulf
swam up to me, floating alone.

At last the sun rose pale from the water.
I bobbed blocks or miles from you
and that white bone of a lighthouse.
Dozing. Waking. Sleeping. All
around the Gulf was birdless,
endless,
the sun growing high again and yellow.

Until the sky began to drone, and a seaplane
floated out of a cloud. My head
was blister-hot, the sun was spinning
gold, voices swam over me from men
in white uniforms: someone in red
had been swimming in a shallows
of sharks. The day froze

to dead calm. *Luck* was all
I heard one say, as your hand
appeared at the seaplane door.
The boat rocked like a cradle,
my skin went cool with noon.
On a green tide of sharks and luck,
we rode all the way home.

KEVIN COLE

AUTISTIC BOY

The earth is meant to harm him.
There can be no preparation for fear or pain;
no promises. His hand, curious to burn,
draws to the stove's fire.

With two fingers he taps the table and sings,
knowing nothing of denial.
He is dedicated to the sounds of the house.
Then to noises locked in his skull only.

I strain to hear syllables
while he mimics the radio—his words
caught behind an endless smile.
He stoops to look into my voice,
young hands unsteady on my shoulders.

In the living room his brother plays the violin,
mother paints, father walks to the window
and back again. Their firstborn leaves no trace
of crayon landscapes or cut-out hearts.
Again he goes to the cellar door
turning the doorknob over and over
with no intent to open or close.

INDOOR POOL

The athlete at a desk takes my dollar
and points me toward the locker room.
There the smell
of old socks and urinal disinfectant
hangs in the sweaty air.
I remember undressing in high school;
the panic once down to my underwear,
the sizing up.

First the whirlpool with its floating heads
where two obese women compare bunyons
and gossip about a grocer.
One old man inspects himself underwater;
a boy eyes a descending girl.
Slowly I give myself up, head back to the heat.

Locking my diaphram, I dive in,
pool empty, smooth as cellophane.
There are spheres of hair on every exhale
and a lifeguard's sinewy legs to my left.
I hear the ocean in a tropical hour
and this lane is my asylum where I imagine
sunlight and a possibility of fish.

Blood pounding I rest on the edge.
Children make awkward plunges,
their frail bodies like static electricity.
I find my towel among the colors
and walk into the shower crazy with thirst:

the water is cool when one boy borrows my shampoo,
his figure skimming mine.
He says something about a girl,
the tanned one in the pool,
and I say she was beautiful,
out of habit.

PAUL ALEXANDER

THE SWIMMERS

On the shore there are several
of them, boys stripping off
their clothes and, one by one,
diving into the deep ravine.
Clearly, their bodies are tanned
hard brown from the long summer
of swimming. Now and then, one
yells something indiscernible

when he springs over the edge,
arms waving as he goes down.
Otherwise, they shout cheerful
greetings to one another.
They say they've known
the intimate comings of strangers.
Indeed, they're all prisoners in
their world of comings and goings.

They know it, not exactly, but
show it with each lusty plunge.
When the last dives, they swim
about this well of green water.
Today, the sun glares down on
the cliffs and a slight breeze
filters in from some distant ocean.
To the boys the water is warm.

It is one simple body gripping
them, embracing each part.
Then on cue they start under,
down into their darker realm.
Stroke after stroke, they work

themselves deeper, deeper, as if
they too are one separate body
moving into the wet soul of

another. Heads turning, they look
about to see one another but
the water stings their eyes. Soon
they can hardly bear their huge
lungs expanding in their chests.
They're lightheaded with anticipation
—blood pulled from their brains—
but lunge ahead deliberately

until they reach the quiet secret
place they long for. They know
everyone, everyone has been here
before, will come again. But
still they grope at something out
there smooth and colorless,
the flesh they desperately clutch
that filters through their fingers.

BRUCE BAWER

BEACH

For Brian

Twelve years old and nearly as tall as I,
my cousin's handsome son draws his big toe
through the cool, firm sand at Rockaway.
"This is my net," he says, his voice as low
as mine, his fingers stroking his slim thigh,
his blond hair tousled on this early May
morning, "and that one's yours." He's tireless.
We've played catch for an hour or so, I guess,
up by the boardwalk, where the chalk-white sand
burned our soles, making us hop from foot
to foot, as if stomping grapes on the strand,
and now (at his insistence; he's put
himself in charge, this tall, no-longer-shy
basketball star of the seventh grade)
we've run down to the heavenly waterside
to play a soccer game; he's marked the field
by drawing in the sand. "All right," I sigh,
unwilling, though exhausted, to forswear
this blessed sport with youth. He cocks his head,
brushes his fingers quickly through his hair,
assumes a cougar's pose, his blue eyes steeled,
his long eyelashes disconcertingly
feminine, looking for all the world
like some Athenian lad about to be
immortalized, three thousand years ago,
in marble; and then, quite suddenly,
without so much as a terse "here we go,"
he rolls his tennis ball onto the sand,
as if he's bowling, and runs swiftly at
the thing, fleet-footed as a wiry cat.
Eyes cool, jaw set, puppet arms and hands

dangling beside his baggy, sky-blue shorts,
he kicks the ball, scores, speeds on, turns his slim
body gently—slowing, sailboat-like,
with the turn (how I marvel at him!)—
and, with a gorgeous, graceful, gull-like swoop,
sweeps up the ball, spins, leaps, and tosses it,
as if this were the school gym, I the hoop.
Clumsy, feeling hopelessly antique
(much more, at least, than twenty-eight), I catch
the ball and roll it off my palm; he crowds,
steals, I press him, slip my foot between
his own, and steal the thing back with a sleek
kick of which I feel absurdly proud.
I score the goal, but don't move fast enough:
the balls rolls into the shallow, slows, and stops.
I splash in after it; my ankles freeze,
the sea salt stings my soles. I bend down,
plunge my left hand in, wrap it around
the ball, walk back toward him and try to squeeze
the water out, as if it were a lime.
"No! Don't do that," he orders. What does he mean?
What, my eyes implore, have I done this time?
"The ball," he explains. "You're standing on the field.
You're not supposed to have it in your hand."
"Oh." I feel like a dope. (How can he
make me feel dumb, when brilliant minds cannot?)
Tentatively, I drop the ball, the hot
sun on my back, and kick; it splatters sand
on him; we scramble for the thing—then all
at once we're both on top of that green ball,
booting, blocking, kicking up huge, wet
clumps of sand onto each other's shins,
circling, glancing, as if the dance had been
choreographed for us by Fred Astaire.
Toe to toe, nose to nose, wrist to thin
wrist—close enough for me to glimpse each fine
eyelash and blue iris, to smell his sweat,
to see the sand grains scattered in his hair,
and note that his legs are as long as mine—

we madly maul the ball, our nearly bare
bodies blazing, and both move beyond
our separate lives, into another state
to which there are no words that correspond,
where our minds, for a moment, celebrate
a rare communion; he looks at me, hot
and pink and perspiration-damp, his blond
hair matted, eyes pellucid as a pond
yet pierced with a pure, perfect happiness,
the same as mine; and how we manage not
to touch at all is anybody's guess.
And suddenly the moment's passed. He gets
the ball, and shoots it straight into his "net."
And, twenty minutes later, when he's shot
the winning goal, then turned to me and grinned
gloriously (as if to tell me, *I'd*
be just as glad if you'd been the one to win),
I—muscles aching, sand-caked, my skin fried
red—grin back at him and think of all
the summers that lie before him, bright and wide
as a white, sun-swept beach; and as we fall
to our exhausted knees, the tide slides in,
erases both our nets, and steals the ball.

COMMENT

FREE BUT ALONE

Selected Poems, by John Ashbery. Viking. $22.95.

The publication of John Ashbery's *Selected Poems* is an occasion I would like to celebrate by avoiding some of the customary rituals of the reviewer. I will not try to assign Ashbery his particular rank in the Pantheon of American poets, and I will say as little as possible about poetic influence and poetic development. I do not know if Ashbery's career can be usefully divided into early and later periods, or into "major" and "minor" poems, so I have mostly evaded these distinctions—an evasion I believe to be in the spirit of Ashbery's own work. Instead, I want to say something about how Ashbery writes—about a particular quality I find everywhere in his work; and I also want to suggest how this quality makes it possible to understand his poetry as a phenomenon of our cultural climate.

Ashbery's poems take the form of an open system, actively resisting closure at every turn. Each statement, each movement in his poetry subjects itself to a constant revision—not just in the conventional sense of qualification and refinement, but in the literal sense of seeing again, of repeatedly shifting the light and perspective in which things are regarded. We are used to reading poems that are like architecture: poems with foundations and support columns, entrances and connecting passages, crossbeams and flying buttresses. But Ashbery's poems seem to abandon this structure in favor of a style analogous to the way we *experience* architecture: we enter and get lost in it; we furnish and inhabit it; we observe it from the air; we are constantly mobile, seeing a different plane or angle at every moment, yet somehow knowing that, independently of the sum of our observations, it constitutes a whole. Ashbery's language moves in this protean, mobile, revisionary way, a process that continually sheds the skin of any hardened meaning. This resistance to closure becomes in fact a sustained *disclosure*—a persistent revealing of the possibilities in language, and hence, in being itself.

An open-ended quality has always characterized Ashbery's work, though its technique has altered from one book of poems to the next. The radical dislocations of the poems from *The Tennis Court Oath* produce a leap into the space vacated by syntactical continuity:

"Am I wonder, / Strategically, and in the light / Of the long sepulcher that hid death and hides me?" Later the terms of this openness become subtler, as in the prose poem called "The System," where the ground of what appears to be an historical narrative keeps shifting imperceptibly, so that any given moment in the poem may seem suddenly removed from the sequence in which it occurs. One arrives at a certain point without knowing quite how, for the point itself appears to call into question the very process by which one got there. Not that this need be cause for much alarm: "It would be wrong to look back at it, and luckily we are so constructed that the urge to do so can never waken in us. We are both alive and free." Things happen in these poems the way they do in life, where there is no story, no meaning, no cause, except the one we choose to assign. Thus, while frequently self-reflexive, Ashbery's language remains free of a limiting self-interpretation, a freedom which depends on a principle of transformation—on the continual turning in directions that transform or oppose what has gone before.

This transformative principle not only applies to Ashbery's technique; it also surfaces as an enduring subject matter throughout these poems, which continually seek metaphors for that quality in experience whereby, in T.S. Eliot's phrase, "every moment is a new and shocking valuation of all we have been." Ashbery's variations on this theme begin with the opening lines of these *Selected Poems*: "We see us as we truly behave: / From every corner comes a distinctive offering." Ashbery wants to insist on the discreteness, the newness of every sensation, to free it from the hierarchy of value that makes us unable to see life itself, "how we truly behave." It is not as if every sensation could be experienced in isolation from the order which surrounds it. That way leads out of consciousness, and therefore out of the realm of language. Rather, Ashbery reminds us of the way each new moment changes our relation to an existing order, and thus brings about a slight alteration within that order, so that experience, like our reading of these poems, involves this jarring loose of things, this continual readjustment of relation, proportion, and value. Amid the welter of "A Last World," Ashbery can refer to this phenomenon rather directly: "Now all is different without having changed / As though one were to pass through the same street at different times / And nothing that is old can prefer the new."—though even this directness changes direction, where the convenient notion of a perceiving subject is displaced by the less identifiable perspective of the third line. Ashbery shifts perspective even as he addresses the experience of shifting perspective.

Another way to say this is that each moment, or each line of a poem, establishes its autonomy by a swerving away from its antecedents. In the elegant "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," Ashbery makes this principle into something approaching a visionary awareness:

> All we know
> Is that we are a little early, that
> Today has that special, lapidary
> Todayness that the sunlight reproduces
> Faithfully in casting twig shadows on blithe
> Sidewalks. No previous day would have been like this.
> I used to think they were all alike,
> That the present always looked the same to everybody
> But this confusion drains away as one
> Is always cresting into one's present.

The sense of newness here derives from an awareness of *difference* as the condition of being alive in time and space: the distinctive offering that comes from every corner depends on the heterogeneity of things, on the discontinuity between one moment and the next. This is not to admit chaos, but rather to experience life, and writing, as a perpetual venturing forth into the open space left by what we know or say.

It is as if every line in Ashbery came on the crest of a wave that carried us into that uncharted space from which everything else looks a little altered. Yet somehow we are not cast adrift, for Ashbery's language steers clear of randomness and confusion as carefully as it avoids the more familiar and congealed forms of meaning. To shift the metaphor, this is a language that plays itself out into diverging directions, like a chess game played on a limitless board. A line from the prose poem "For John Clare" puts it this way: ". . . the whole history of probabilities is coming to life, starting in the upper left-hand corner, like a sail." Here we are offered the image of living as writing, and of writing, like living, as a voyage without end into the vast blank space of the unwritten page. This writing cannot resolve itself into the sustained development of a theme or a narrative trajectory. Rather it functions as a continual unfolding of possibilities. As he says in "Pyrography," "No sighs like Russian music, only a vast unravelling / Out toward the junctions and to the darkness beyond." This movement makes Ashbery's language a literal enactment of Eliot's belief that "We must be still and still moving /

into another intensity," and of Baudelaire's voyage "Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du *nouveau*!"

It is the price Ashbery pays for this freedom, however, that divides him from a high modernist like Eliot or a symbolist like Baudelaire. It was possible for them to speak in the voice of exile, to invoke the names of Andromache or Tiresias, to cry out in nihilistic despair at the flight of the gods. But Ashbery can afford none of this. The openness of his language depends, paradoxically, on a rigorous evasion of the master narratives of history, myth, and metaphysics that have held sway over not just modernism, but over the entire Western tradition. If one were to describe Ashbery's poetic universe, it would be nothing like the theological universe of Eliot or Dante, the political universe of Pound or Virgil, the moral universe of Baudelaire or Shakespeare. It would be no universe at all, in the sense of a world made into an object, defined by value, and capable of being represented. Instead of a universe, Ashbery offers a *style* which, through its transformative strategies, calls into question the nature of object, value, and representation.

These strategies put Ashbery's poetry curiously in harmony with his time and place. In writing on "the postmodern condition," Jean-François Lyotard sees the principle of *performance* as the central governing value of contemporary Western culture. Liberated from the notion of an ultimate Truth about nature, science no longer seeks to represent some outside reality, but instead simply seeks to generate "new ideas," i.e. more scientific activity. Rather than the accumulation of knowledge, science becomes an open-ended system that perpetually renews itself in ever more complex and dazzling forms. The arts, as well, have steadily abandoned representation in favor of artistic practice that calls attention to the conceptual or physical process by which it comes into being. It was inevitable that "performance art" should occupy the position of the avant-garde today, for it is the art form that by its very nature disavows any pretense of signifying or interpreting reality—reality being that which is constantly re-created in performance. Contemporary art and science thus are defined by the infinite capacity for innovation, rupture, and renewal that defines capitalism itself. And, like capitalism, they also produce systems of value independent of any transcendent theological, social, or aesthetic imperative.

What would writing look like if, like pure performance, it abandoned the pretense of signification and interpretation in favor of this self-generating system of perpetual break and renewal? It would look like the poetry of John Ashbery, except that in Ashbery there is always a residue of interpretation left over from the nature of language itself, which cannot help but signify, and from Ashbery's unremitting engagement with all of these questions about art, language, meaning, and being.

The Roman poet Horace had said that poetry is like a picture, but the Ashbery poem that quotes Horace in its title—"And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name"—begins with these lines:

> You can't say it that way any more.
> Bothered about beauty you have to
> Come out into the open, into a clearing,
> And rest.

Poetry is no longer to depict, reflect, refer to, or stand for something—like beauty, truth, or nature—outside itself. No longer hiding behind meaning, it is to come out into the open place where writing has the same relation to meaning as does music or dance.

The poem which begins with this *ars poetica* later shifts into what one might call the pure performance mode, as it hurtles forward through a series of destabilizing gestures:

> She approached me
> About buying her desk. Suddenly the street was
> Bananas and the clangor of Japanese instruments.
> Humdrum testaments were scattered around. His head
> Locked into mine. We were a seesaw.

This is neither allegory nor narrative, but a juxtaposition of images justified by their own dynamic arrangement. Roland Barthes has suggested that in contemporary experimental writing, "to write" has become an intransitive verb, like "to be" or "to act," eliminating the traditional myth of a duality between word and object, between writing and the world to which it ostensibly refers. What, then, is the field or the space in which writing occurs? "The field of the writer is nothing but writing itself"—not in the banal, exclusive sense of an art for art's sake, but, more radically, as the only place there is for the one who writes.

This notion of what it means to write is implied, I believe, in the way Ashbery's poems make remarks about themselves, as well as in the way they *take place*—in the double sense of occurring and, like the dance, assuming their own space. It would be easy to dismiss this idea of writing as a decadent aesthetic which isolates writing from the world outside it, like Baudelaire's imaginary "magic palaces in the night" (Ashbery's translation). But for Ashbery there *is* no outside; the distinction between writing and being alive in the world has collapsed forever. This is what ultimately connects his poetry to contemporary life in our culture. The final lines of "And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name" demonstrate this unity of the poetic process with the human problems of desire, communication, and understanding:

> Something
> Ought to be written about how this affects
> You when you write poetry:
> The extreme austerity of an almost empty mind
> Colliding with the lush, Rousseau-like foliage of its desire to
> communicate
> Something between breaths, if only for the sake
> Of others and their desire to understand you and desert you
> For other centers of communication, so that understanding
> May begin, and in doing so be undone.

A poetic style that continually overturns its own premises may be taken as a metaphor for the instabilities of being human: the volatile divisions between mind and desire, the elusive nature of understanding between individuals. But here Ashbery does more than simply produce a metaphor. He sees the poetic process as being itself the explosive fusion of mind and desire, as well as the energy that brings about understanding, however fugitive it may be. Finally, this is not merely a statement that treats poetry in the abstract, but a verbal performance that fulfills its own prophecy: these lines actively bring about precisely the relation between writer and reader that they describe. So the poem is not only about "how this affects you when you write poetry," but also about how we are affected as we read it.

A poem of Rilke speaks of "our unshieldedness" in the face of life as it opens before us, except that, unlike plants or animals, we as human beings willingly go *with* this adventure into the open, daring to affirm our lack of cover. Ashbery writes in the spirit of this affirmation, continually beginning and undoing the work of understanding in a performance that directly engages consciousness, refusing to protect itself with inherited structures of meaning.

This willful unshieldedness accounts, I think, for Ashbery's desertion of an entire series of poetic conventions: the setting of a poem in time and place, the myth of the figure of the poet, the distinction between the poet as subject and the world as object, the development of a narrative based on crisis and resolution. Instead, Ashbery's poems elude any particular time and place, ignore the figure of the poet, dissolve the subject-object relation, and so remove the ground on which crisis could occur.

This abdication of convention separates Ashbery from even his closest contemporaries. Frank O'Hara writes about "The Day Lady Died," and Kenneth Koch writes about a love affair in New York in 1953. But for Ashbery, as he puts it in a poem called "Hop O' My Thumb,"

> There is no day in the calendar
> The dairy company sent out
> That lets you possess it wildly like
> The body of a dreaming woman in a dream.
> All flop over at the top when seized,
> The stem too slender, the top too loose and heavy,
> Blushing with fine foliage of dreams.

The day cannot be seized and reconstructed, Ashbery suggests, without doing violence to the original. And as for this original, how much of it was illusion to begin with? Such questions banish any recognizable setting for the poem, as well as any fixed relation between the poet and his surroundings. The same poem continues a few lines later: "I remember meeting you in a dark dream / Of April, you or some girl, / The necklace of wishes alive and breathing around your throat." Here the gesture toward recalling an actual occasion quickly fades into the alternate possibilities of the oneiric and visionary, like the end of Keats's ode: "Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?"—although one of the limits overcome by Ashbery's language is that the dream has the same reality, or lack of reality, as the waking state. It goes the same way with the person addressed here, "you or some girl"—human identity, like time, always merges into something else: "We could not know each other or know which part / Belonged to the other. . . ."

"Hop O' My Thumb" belongs to the same original volume as "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," which picks up the theme of variable identity with an arresting poignancy:

> This otherness, this
> "Not-being-us" is all there is to look at

In the mirror, though no one can say
How it came to be this way.

Ashbery has been compared to Stevens, but here we have something very different from the heroic rage for order that masters and portions out, "Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles." Ashbery's estrangement from such an order removes his poetry from the fixed polarities of self and other, subject and object, dreaming and waking. This is also why Ashbery's poems do not build toward crisis, for that kind of construction requires a more stable foundation. Instead, they seem to travel steadily past the frontiers that normally arrange consciousness, to walk coolly through any obstactle without breaking stride. This undisturbed forward movement has the effect of reducing everything to a common value, a sameness of affect:

I feel the carousel starting slowly
And going faster and faster: desk, papers, books,
Photographs of friends, the window and the trees
Merging in one neutral band that surrounds
Me on all sides, everywhere I look.
And I cannot explain the action of leveling,
Why it should all boil down to one
Uniform substance, a magma of interiors.

This returns us to the sacrifice Ashbery has made for a poetic form that keeps opening out into new territory. There is the same pathos here as in the enigmatic figure of Tennyson's Ulysses, for whom "all experience is an arch wherethro' / Gleams that untravelled world whose margin fades / For ever and for ever when I move." Ashbery, like this Ulysses, has left behind the Ithaca of law, duty, worship, kinship—in short, of value and relation—in restless pursuit of some perpetually newer way of being.

In seeking to describe the particular dynamic of Ashbery's poetry, I have spoken of transformation, openness, and freedom on one hand, and of instability, estrangement, and "unshieldedness" on the other. Of course, these things go together in his work, just as they do in a world where the truth of who we are and how we behave is subject to endless analysis, revision, and reconstruction. But one may ask, what is the point of this ceaseless reinvention of ourselves and our world when each new moment brings us not only into an uncharted present, but also closer to our mortal end? This is the question that Ashbery poses in "A Wave," the long final poem of this collection:

> To be always articulating these preludes, there seems to be no
> Sense in it, if it is going to be perpetually five o'clock
> With the colors of the bricks seeping more and more bloodlike
> through the tan
> Of trees, and then only to blacken.

The awareness of impending death, one's own as well as that of everything around one, would seem to make it absurd to be always articulating these preludes, always recreating one's world through the medium of language. Ashbery's own response to this dilemma is startling for its simplicity and human dignity:

> But it says more
> About us. When they finally come
> With much laborious jangling of keys to unlock your cell
> You can tell them yourself what it is,
> Who you are, and how you happened to turn out this way,
> And how they made you, for better or for worse, what you are
> now,
> And how you seem to be, neither humble nor proud, *frei aber einsam.*

Free but alone. Such is the cost of what Heidegger has called the venture into being, the ever-renewed questioning that leaves us exposed to our own finitude and to the unconcealed nature of pain, death, and love, and yet that gives life to the human spirit. In a world that endangers all forms of value, Ashbery affirms at least a provisional value for his own poetic utterance, which after all says something about us, and who we are, and how we came to be this way. And since the form of that utterance is something like what it means to be living in this world, he seems, finally, to affirm that, too.

DAVID SPURR

CONTRIBUTORS

MAXINE KUMIN's most recent collection of poems is *The Long Approach*, published last fall by Viking. Last year, she held a Fellowship from the Academy of American Poets, was a Woodrow Wilson Fellow at St. Mary's College, and lectured at the Salzburg Seminar in Austria.

MARIE BORROFF has published verse translations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Pearl*. She is a professor of English at Yale, where she lectures on twentieth-century poetry in the College.

JAMES COLE has contributed to many literary journals and, since 1963, has taught English at the University of Wyoming.

DAVID KELLER* holds degrees from Harvard and the University of Wisconsin, and is a graphic designer; "when not looking for work," he reports, he performs "with a stilt-walking troupe calling itself The American Legion." He has recent poems in *Poetry Northwest* and *Indiana Review*.

TOM DISCH published *The Brave Little Toaster: A Bedtime Story for Small Appliances*, his first book for children, with Doubleday in May; it is now in production by a Disney subsidiary as a feature-length cartoon to be released this Christmas. He has also recently produced *Amnesia*, "a computer-interactive novel" (Electronic Arts).

WILLIAM HATHAWAY's fourth collection, *Fish, Flesh & Fowl*, appeared last year from LSU Press. He lives in Saratoga Springs, New York, and teaches at Union College.

TURNER CASSITY's new collection, his fifth, is *Hurricane Lamp*, published in March by the University of Chicago Press. Last fall, he visited Istanbul and the Danube countries, and is "happy to report that socialism is doomed."

CAROLYNE WRIGHT's chapbook, *From a White Woman's Journal*, poems based on Latin America, was published last year by Water Mark Press. Her new manuscript, *The Custody of the Eyes*, was a 1985 National Poetry Series Finalist. She has recent poems in *New American Poets of the 80's* (Wampeter) and *Blood to Remember: American Poets on the Holocaust* (Avon).

GARY MYERS* took his Ph.D. in May from the University of Houston. His poems have appeared in *Indiana Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, *The New Yorker*, and *Kansas Quarterly*. This fall he will join the English faculty of Mercyhurst College, in Erie, Pennsylvania.

ROBERT B. SHAW, a frequent contributor of poetry and criticism to these pages, teaches at Mount Holyoke College. In May, he read from his work at Kenyon College.

KATHARINE SONIAT's *Notes of Departure* won The Camden Poetry Award last year, and was published by the Walt Whitman Center. She has new work in The *North American*, *New Orleans*, and *New Virginia* Reviews.

KEVIN COLE attended Indiana University and is a painter, photographer, and collector of American Indian Art. He first appeared here in April of 1985.

PAUL ALEXANDER* holds a B.A. from the University of Alabama and an M.F.A. from the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. His poems have appeared in *Southern Poetry Review*, *Poetry Now*, *The Black Warrior Review*, and other journals. He has edited a collection of essays on the life and work of Sylvia Plath, *Ariel Ascending*, published last year by Harper & Row. He is now writing a critical biography of the poet.

BRUCE BAWER appears regularly in a number of literary and popular journals, here and in England. This year he has two books forthcoming: *The Middle Generation*, a study of Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman, and Robert Lowell (Archon Books); and a writing handbook for Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.

DAVID SPURR* took his three degrees from the University of Michigan and is now an assistant professor of English and Fellow of the Institute for Humanities at the University of Illinois at Chicago. In 1985, the University of Illinois Press published his *Conflicts in Consciousness: T.S. Eliot's Poetry and Criticism*. His new book will be called *A Rhetoric of Domination: Journalism and the Western Imagination*.

*First appearance in *Poetry*.

NEWS NOTES

We are very pleased to announce that the first Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize has been awarded to Adrienne Rich. The Prize, in the amount of $25,000, was presented by Mr. John Kitchen, representing the donor, Mrs. Ruth Lilly, and by Mr. Milton Rhodes, President of the American Council for the Arts, and Mr. Patrick Shaw, President of The Modern Poetry Association, in a ceremony co-hosted by the sponsoring organizations at The Newberry Library, on June 6th. Joining in congratulating Adrienne Rich were the judges for this year's award, the poets Maxine Kumin and David Wagoner and the Editor of *Poetry*, as well as members of the press and friends from around the country. The Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize was established this year "to honor an American poet whose accomplishments warrant extraordinary recognition."

Adrienne Rich is the author of eleven volumes of poetry and two prose works. She was graduated from Radcliffe College in 1951, the same year her first book was published. W. H. Auden chose *A Change of World* for the prestigious Yale Series of Younger Poets Award when the author was only 21. Her other collections of poetry include: *The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems* (1955), *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963), *Necessities of Life* (1966), *Selected Poems* (1967), *Leaflets: Poems 1965–1968* (1969), *The Will To Change* (1971), *Diving into the Wreck* (1973), *Poems Selected and New, 1950–1974* (1975), *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978), *The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Selected and New, 1950–1984* (1984), and the recently published *Your Native Land, Your Life*. Adrienne Rich is also the author of two books of prose: *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) and *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966–1978* (1979). A new book, *Blood, Break, and Poetry*, is scheduled for publication this fall.

In 1952–53, Adrienne Rich studied at Oxford on a Guggenheim Fellowship; in the early Sixties, she was awarded a second Guggenheim, as well as a grant from The American Institute of Arts and Letters, a Bollingen Foundation grant for translation, and numerous other awards for poetry, including *Poetry*'s Bess Hokin and Eunice Tietjens Prizes. She moved to New York City in 1966, becoming increasingly involved in the civil rights, anti-war, and feminist movements.

Adrienne Rich has taught writing and women's studies at Swarthmore College, Columbia University, The City College of New York, Brandeis, Rutgers, and Cornell, and in Scripps College at San Jose State University. She is Professor of English and Feminist Studies at Stanford University.

In 1976, her collection *Diving into the Wreck* was co-winner of the National Book Award; with the other two nominees, Audre Lorde and Alice Walker, she rejected the award as an individual, accepting it on behalf of all women, including those "whose voices had been suppressed." A very popular speaker, she has read her poetry and lectured on feminist themes at colleges, universities, women's centers and conferences in the U.S., Canada, Japan, France, and Great Britain. Adrienne Rich's poetry and prose have been translated into German, French, Spanish, Swedish, Dutch, Italian, and Japanese.

The Boards of The American Council for the Arts and The Modern Poetry Association, as well as the Staff of *Poetry*, join with Adrienne Rich's many readers and friends throughout the world in offering sincere best wishes, and gratitude for her extraordinary achievement.

BOOKS RECEIVED

VERSE

Travels: A Bilingual Edition, by Yehuda Amichai. Tr. by Ruth Nevo. Sheep Meadow Press (Riverdale-on-Hudson, NY). $13.95 cloth; $9.95 paper.

Tongues of Fire: An Anthology of Religious and Poetic Experience, ed. by Karen Armstrong. Viking. $19.95

Sea Urchin Harakiri, by Bernard Bador. Tr. by Clayton Eshleman. Bi-lingual text. Panjandrom Books (Los Angeles). $15.95 cloth; $6.95 paper.

Israeli Poetry: A Contemporary Anthology, ed. and tr. by Warren Bargad and Stanley F. Chyet. Indiana University Press. $29.95.

Selected Poems, by Robert Bly. Harper & Row. $8.95.

Relations: Selected Poems 1950–1985, by Philip Booth. Viking Penguin. $25.00 cloth; $12.95 paper.

Ragtime in Unfamiliar Bars, by Ron Butlin. Secker & Warburg. Distrib. by David & Charles. $8.95.

Love in Mid-Winter Night: Korean Sijo Poetry, tr. by Chung Chong-Wa. Routledge & Kegan Paul/Methuen. $29.95.

Do You Take This Woman . . ., by Ann Darr. Washington Writers' Publishing House. $5.00.

The Pentekontaetia (The Great Fifty Years), by Ann Deagon. Water Mark Press. $6.00.

The Complete Poems, by Edwin Denby. Ed. by Ron Padgett. Random House. $16.95.

Sometimes Music Rises, by Wayne Dodd. University of Georgia Press. $10.95 cloth; $6.95 paper.

The Young Pobble's Guide to His Toes, by Gavin Ewart. Hutchinson. Distrib. by David & Charles. $13.95.

Windows Facing East, by Caroline Finkelstein. Dragon Gate (Port Townsend, WA). $14.00 cloth; $7.00 paper.

Daily Horoscope, by Dana Gioia. Graywolf Press (St. Paul). $15.00 cloth; $8.00 paper.

Thomas Gray and William Collins: Poetical Works. Ed. by Roger Lonsdale. Oxford University Press. $13.50.

Selected and New Poems: 1939–84, by J. C. Hall. Secker & Warburg. Distrib. by David & Charles. $8.95.

When There Are No Secrets, by C. G. Hanzlicek. Carnegie-Mellon University Press. $14.95 cloth; $6.95 paper.

The Theory & Practice of Rivers, by Jim Harrison. Winn Books (Seattle). $7.95.

Stone Fences, by Paal-Helge Haugen. Tr. by William Mishler and Roger Greenwald. Bilingual text. University of Missouri Press. $8.95.

The Chicago Home, by Linnea Johnson. Alice James Books. $12.95 cloth; $6.95 paper.

The Sea at the Door, by Sylvia Kantaris. Secker & Warburg. Distrib. by David & Charles. $8.95.

Early Verse by Rudyard Kipling, 1879–1889: Unpublished, Uncollected, and Rarely Collected Poems. Ed. by Andrew Rutherford. Oxford University Press. $34.50.

The Queen of Lost Baggage, by Barbara F. Lefcowitz. Washington Writers' Publishing House. $5.00.

Black Dog, by Margo Lockwood. Alice James Books. $12.95 cloth; $6.95 paper.

Elizabethan Verse, ed. by Edward Lucie-Smith. Penguin Books. $6.95.

Half-Promised Land, by Thomas Lux. Houghton Mifflin. $13.95 cloth; $6.95 paper.

The Prince of Peace, by Prakash Mahanadia. Jeypore Evangelical Lutheran Church (India). No price listed.

Falling Awake, by Gary Margolis. University of Georgia Press. $10.95 cloth; $6.95 paper.

Wild Bouquet: Nature Poems, by Harry Martinson. Tr. by William Jay Smith and Leif Sjoberg. BkMk Press (Kansas City, MO). $10.95.

The Pose of Happiness, by Gail Mazur. David R. Godine. $13.95 cloth; $8.95 paper.

The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry, ed. by Paul Muldoon. Faber and Faber. $24.95 cloth; $13.95 paper.

Nightriffer, by Stanley Nelson. Birch Book Press (Otisville, NY). $5.95.

Collected Poems, 1963–1985, by Margaret Newlin. Ardis (Ann Arbor). $25.00.

Selections from the Carmina Burana: A Verse Translation, by David Parlett. Penguin Books. $6.95.

What Women Know, What Men Believe, by Wyatt Prunty. The Johns Hopkins University Press. $12.95 cloth; $6.95 paper.

Ukulele Music, by Peter Reading. Secker & Warburg. Distrib. by David & Charles. $8.95.

Your Native Land, Your Life, by Adrienne Rich. W. W. Norton. $6.95.

Rainer Maria Rilke: Selected Poems. Tr. by Albert Ernest Flemming. Methuen. $22.00 cloth; $9.95 paper.

Faultdancing, by William Pitt Root. University of Pittsburgh Press. $13.95 cloth; $6.95 paper.

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POETRY

AUGUST 1986

THOMAS CARPER

THE BEAUTY OF POETRY

I have heard it maintained by a critic of relative authority that the beauty of poetry consists entirely in the frequent utterance of the sound of "j" and "sh," and the consequent copious flow of saliva in the mouth.

Santayana, POETRY AND RELIGION

I have heard a respectable critic say,
And heard his judgment greeted with a hush,
That frequent utterance of the sound of "j"
And "sh" in poems shall get our glands to gush
A joyful moisture, and inspire a rush
Of admiration that will keep alive a
Sonnet for a century. But tush,
It surely will not be shots of saliva
That let a shabby jingling verse survive a
Scrutiny when there's no thought to convey.
And did our special poets just contrive a
Kind of canning that can stash away
Small jars of juice we open and send sloshing
Into our mouths? Maybe the critic's joshing.

OH KEEP THE POET HENCE

Dante Gabriel Rossetti buried manuscript poems, bound in gray calf, with his wife; seven years later he had them disinterred (in this sonnet he does it himself) and then published them.

The Blesséd Damozel was shocked. She fumed.
For, peering from the Realm of Lasting Life,
She saw that her Creator had exhumed
The coffin of his most belovéd wife,
And there was fishing in the earthy vapors
For poems of which he had not kept a copy.
(This, for a man of many words and papers,
He now thought unprofessionally sloppy.)
The disillusioned Lady dropped a tear
As musically as in the Poet's verses,
Weeping that sentiment should disappear
Amid the mutterings and whispered curses—
That ended when he spied gray calf, that bound them:
"Oh bless my dearest Love. They're safe. I've found them!"

WHAT PEOPLE MAKE

It's a little hard to explain to my friends at first what I do. They don't really understand that people make kazoos.
John Battaglia in the NEW YORK TIMES

They make wars, babies, sonnets, money, haste,
Fantastic visions, patent leather shoes,
Pledges to keep, paper towels to waste,
Long recipes for life and oyster stews,
Thick books contrived for everybody's taste,
Slim volumes only doting authors choose,
New glasses for the old when they're replaced,
And awkward pauses anyone can use.
For people stuck on sticking, they make paste;
For people stuck on answers, they make clues;
For people just plain stuck, or who are faced
With failure, they make big bottles of booze;
And for those seeking simply to amuse
Themselves a moment, people make kazoos.

HEAVENLY PARK

This was the ad I'd waited for. N.J.
Was where I had been born, so it seemed right
To hope that there I might be put away
To spend my ultimate, "ever-during night."
And what an elegant block-long mausoleum!
I would be spared traumatic in-ground burial,
And just be shelved, as in an art museum,
On my own private slab, a sort of carryall
Into a future where no annual care
Or bills for annual maintenance could keep
Me tossing. One stiff payment would assure
My little niche in the "eternal sleep."
The slots are selling fast. I'll buy! I'll deft-
Ly die while there is still some prime space left.

TOM DISCH

IN DEFENSE OF FOREST LAWN

In his poem "Tract" William Carlos Williams
recommends a style for funerals
much like the style he practiced
as a poet: a "rough plain hearse"
resembling a farm wagon, its driver
demoted to walk alongside holding the reins,
and the mourners riding after
with conspicuous inconvenience, open
"to the weather as to grief."

In horse-and-buggy days, perhaps,
such a scenario might have worked,
but nowadays much-weathered wood denotes
deluxe accommodations. A triumph
for Williams' esthetics, but the problem
remains: how to bury people simply
and tastefully, without on the one hand
holding up traffic unduly or on the other
treating the corpse like industrial waste.

Personally I think that Forest Lawn
has got just about the right combination
of hokum and expedience, gravitas and pizazz.
People are inclined to laugh at Forest Lawn,
having been instructed by Evelyn Waugh
that only the Sovereign Pontiff can *own*
the Pietà, that Europe has the copyright
on class, and that Americans had better stick
to . . . What would he suggest: farm wagons?

But if Romans did well to copy Greek originals,
if museums needn't be embarrassed by their casts—
if, that is, form and not seignoralty

is our ideal, then why shouldn't Forest Lawn
heap as much of the enmarbled past
on the plates of our grief as, say,
Westminster Abbey or St. Paul's? Why shouldn't
the dead, God damn it, be allowed one Parthian
shot at greatness? Aren't wakes for feasting?

Suppose we did it in the minimalist way
Williams suggests, bankrupting florists
and stonecutters. Do you think the heirs
in their enhanced prosperity would endow
posterity with anything so grand or lush
as a properly got-up cemetery? Think again.
How, I wonder, did Waugh himself get planted?
Opulently, I'm sure. So, gentlemen, if you'll step
Over here, I'd like to show you our brochure.

THE ARGUMENT RESUMED;
Or,
Up Through Tribeca

It may not be forever, but
The zing of beauty in the middle
Of the day—this little kid, for instance,
Heading home in his stroller,
Radiantly silly in a knitted snowsuit,
Or those windows of snazzy bowls
A few blocks back, all of solid wood
But gleaming as from a kiln
(Somebody should pay good money for that.
Ah, to be rich!) . . . The zing, I say,
An dich as we take our constitutional
Does add a luster when a luster is needed,
And if that luster fades as we proceed
Elsewhere, there's no call to be
Bereft. We are left with our store
Of memories: the scent, maybe, of a herbal rinse
Familiar from childhood. Or the sky may echo
The blue of a favorite tie. But "forever"?
Doesn't that tend to detract from the glory
Of the thing? Glory must burst
On us like fireworks. If the gleam
Or the sweetness isn't fleeting,
How shall it bear repeating?
How should we dare to eat another
Sundae of sunsets? See where a peach
Glows among other peaches in the fruitbowl.
Such and no other is the soul.

ALLEN GINSBERG

WRITTEN IN MY DREAM BY W. C. WILLIAMS

"As Is
you're bearing

a common
Truth

Commonly known
as desire

No need
to dress

it up
as beauty

No need
to distort

what's not
standard

to be
understandable.

Pick your
nose

eyes ears
tongue

sex and
brain

to show
the populace

Take your
chances

on
your accuracy

Listen to
yourself

talk to
yourself

and others
will also

gladly
relieved

of the burden—
their own

thought
and grief.

What began
as desire

will end
wiser."

Baoding, China
November 23, 1984

JUDITH SKILLMAN

THE LIBRARIAN DECIDES ON CRYONICS

Just his head, stuffed with children's books
and the thin yellow cards of the catalogue,
tissue ruffled and scored with red letters
of microfiche. Right and left halves,
aisles where the bad novels grow worse
and the good novels go unread.

And not that it was easy to make this decision,
when he met the cryologist at a party
it was doubt and mixed drinks, the cherry
of the lush present dangling on its thin stem
into their glasses. Just talk.

That's when the books reached into his life
with their thin jackets and took his loved ones,
one by one, a father, an aunt, the grandmother
whose jellies well deserved their local reputation.
It became obvious, the fragility of life,
the slim volumes filled with their choices:
to die or be frozen, freezedried.

He'll have a new body, though. It's expensive
to freeze a body, one so footnoted with cancer
and bad vision as his will be.
Hats off, then, to the librarian,
his head that is, strapped in a steel urn
in a one-way glass building,
catalogued and paid up through 2200.
With all the time in the world to kill,
and the entire backlog of the humanities
to take his time on, thawing out and catching up.

ROBERT N. FEINSTEIN

HEAVEN CAN'T WAIT

Consortium of U.S. morticians and engineers plans to rocket cremated remains into orbit.

News item

Ashes to NASA, dust to space,
Sidereal slag of the human race.

What choir will celebrate Te Deums to these mini-mausoleums?
Can families chant a solemn Kaddish to these oddments disemboddish?
And where their final destination, these sequelae of cremation?
At least the special situation yields a tourist-free location.

The press releases make it clear that things are better there than here;
In fact, they all imply it's mod to wind up nearer to thy God.
It's sure to be a status symbol, being fitted in a thimble
And shot aloft to meet thy Maker, thanks to a high-tech undertaker.

Away from earth and its depravity, secure beyond the clutch of gravity,
In time we'll populate the void, with each his private asteroid.
Astronomers unborn as yet will some day rue this jetted set,
And military men will mutter, blasting this celestial clutter.

Twinkling stars in peaceful sky,
We'll all be with you by and by.

ALBERT GOLDBARTH

A MONUMENT

It's a weak chargray-and-camellia dusk
when we start lugging out the corpses.
How at a party you'll fly off into your 4th white wine
and be lost for the evening. When I still went
down to Mexico with Tony though they needed to run more
tests on your chest. Who spends most blindly.
All of the corpses, starting with the old ones that are really
only fossils now, the chalk and lime
suggestions of a grievance. Even the smallest ones, that died
straight after their first inhalation and scream—the size
of yams in our hands, and we're bringing them one
by one to the livingroom, propping them up,
filling the air with their foxfire. Now the sky is
doing the same: is hefting, faithfully, its store of bodies
up for staged display. Against the black, that
archer, virgin, regent, take on size their damaged lives had
   only
dimly hoped for—now they burn
along their skins at definitive
ganglion-knots or open wounds or love-pinches
in a resplendence, their original
resuscitators having borne them overhead with grander
honorific and expiatory design than
we, inside our charnel-house, can manage.
Callisto, Cassiopeia, Orion: limb by limb,
re-membered. Under stars like these,
while the sensible burghers of Paris snored and the world was
given over to the twiddle of roach and mantis, Géricault
dragged his sacked cadavers
from the hospital morgue to pose inside
his studio—knew their arms, draped, weighty, stone
bolognas chilling his nape—and fussed
their wretched flesh until it met his compositional

desires. Some stank. A few were entering blue. All
turned, beneath his flinchless vision, to the 15
passengers left of 149 the crew had sentenced
peremptorily to a raft and then abandoned. Now that raft,
exact in mockup, fills his floor. And now
his sad bespraddled lovelies fill the raft—he's had
a witness list positions, all 15, the dead, the living,
interstacked. And giving everthing to this;
he's shaved his head in devotion. He lotions one
hard arm: he's learned this picks his lamplight's accents
out in a semblance of life. And now he opens that hand
—like a beast on its back, attempting a miniature
last dignity. Did they talk about home?
Did they care where they shat? All night, with them,
with the waters off Senegal rising to pull at his knees
until the sun shows and the stars blank past their vanishing
  point,
and still he's huffing under more bundles,
shuffling, finicking, corpse on corpse, a monument to work
toward and away from.

SEEING

Thomas Coryate—17th century English wit, writer,
eccentric and courageous traveller; poor, solo, and on
foot, he journeyed Europe and the near East, often where
only handfulls of his countrymen had preceded him

If it was water, Poseidon
presided, with his trident the flashing
axis of the picture plane, and water nymphs
symmetrically disposing their ambrosia-anchovy
charms from the lips of conchshell carriages—this of course
was Art in the 17th century. If
it was mountains, nobody noticed, or
thought to mention them, anyway—this
was 17th century travel. Mountains:
those "ugly obstructions." Coryate, that
irrepressible commentator on seemingly everything,
beheading blocks, the ostrich, "things that minister shadow"
(umbrellas), courtesans' veils, gondolas, formal gardens, wheat
wind wrote gold esses through . . . he
crossed the Alps by foot and horse and hired chair, and later
climbed Milan's cathedral towers with that jagged lavender
majesty just north, and never mentions them. So
seeing isn't constant. It takes 130 years
before the Alps are swelling "pregnant
with religion and poetry"—Thomas Gray (and later Turner
paints a roiling light-striated study of that very
Alps pass Coryate crossed with unresponding eyes) or
Gainsborough's thoroughly gentled-over mountains come
to look like landscape we could lose ourselves in
comfortably. Here's a tarp-sized pool
the midges grosgrain in landing. We swivel
our litre into its equally valpolicella-dark soil,
unfoil the chicken, lazy back and breathe
this air so light it rides all other
air's thermals. Cream air, cork air, air on top, this tissue
giftwrap air the world's in. Oh

but even as the mustard furze of lichen
and the sky-serrating backdrop run of scarps
supplies us context for a closeness, there's
divorcetalk in the air, not
large, not still and observable, no, but,
like the midges, hovering endlessly at the edges and
drunk on our sweat. You were this way and this way,
you say. No, that way, I tell you. The couple we both
agreed was so "political" that evening at the Morrises—you
meant "engaged in the public arena" and good, I
meant "relying on clout and gladhanding"—bad. What
isn't bad by now? Some capillaries pinch my cells
like raptor talons, I leave to go dangle
my legs off a ledge all alone, unpleat
these fists and calm the crazy threat of embolism
out of each stutter of breath. I want to calm
and do calm, see exactly mountains that I need to see
to calm: a deeply gray-and-magenta enduring of crests
the late sun lavishes over like yolk. In the shadow
of such, in the touch of this magnificent upthrusting
for the first time, Coryate saw and described
in amazement—it's their first description
in English—little tridents he'd found,
"a custom in all Italian Townes, they
doe alwaies use at their meales and call it a forke."
He tried fried frogs with it, and happily, but
for their blanket of cheese,
"which I love not so well as the Welchmen doe."

THE MORE MODEST THE DEFINITION OF HEAVEN, THE OFTENER WE'RE THERE

Years later they let him go. New evidence
—somebody's shoe and a letter, and then
another man confessed. So along with the cheap gray suit
and job ads that they all receive, he
had a brief note of apology. I suppose some people
go wild or bitter. But this is what happened to him:
we're sitting up way past midnight in August,
the six of us, hoping for a breeze. The air
might move in a solid block, as if pushed
by a streetsweeper's broom, but you couldn't call it
a breeze. Hot isn't the word. The stars
only make the sky a sore throat. And one of us,
Sally maybe, says we must be dead because
it's hell for sure, and the rest of us laugh, but
he's been called far out of our little bent circle,
you can tell by his eyes, they're filled with the moon,
with the simple delight of seeing the moon touch all of us
all over without a bar in the way,
without the shadow of even one bar
to fall on the light like a nightstick.

BEN HOWARD

BECAUSE YOU ASKED FOR A BEDTIME STORY

The time will come when nothing of any worth
Will be remembered by the connoisseurs
Of video games, computers, frozen foods,
The whole warehouse going up in flames
Or merely dissolving into molecules
Of Western Culture, particles of value,
The atoms spinning freely into the void,

The center sliding, moment by moment, sideways
Or into a darkness unrelieved by neon,
A formlessness we've dreamt of, after all,
Though never seen, except in inferior films
Or in those moments of our childhoods
When something shook the house, and no one came
To caress our brows or hasten us into sleep.

1985

The world's long fires burn beyond
your window. You stir, arrange your pens,
write your notes to distant friends,
who hear—no less than you—the crash
of beams, the shouts and sirens. Brave

or cowardly, you want your friends
to answer for the violence
that rumbles under your pen, that shakes
your signature askew. The world's
black smoke has made a line you thought

your own, a hand you can't control
by will or diligent erasure.

BILL MEISSNER

SO MANY AMERICANS, DRIVING LATE ON COUNTRY ROADS

The most likely time for a fatal automobile accident is one a.m. Sunday morning. Often these accidents involve a single car with one passenger.
Newspaper article

It's always this place that calls you. You
turn a corner at the edge of town,
the wheel in your hands the outline of a shape
you no longer understand.

Like the dozens of drivers all over America
who parallel you tonight on other country roads,
you stare though a horizon of curved glass:
the asphalt deepens into a starless sky.
Your wallet is full; you believe you could accelerate
for years. You don't realize you're following a blinking line
of drivers, their names in smeared ink
of Monday morning obituaries.
Their histories yellow in basements,
like your headlights fading beyond the gravel shoulder.

The speedometer turns over. The dashboard
flares. This place always calls
you, its voice softer
than your velour seats, calls you
to close your eyes
and meet it head on.

It's the simple end that is best.
Beyond that first sharp curve,
a single tree waits.

Never a witness. Perhaps
a lone dog whose ears straighten at the
impact. It limps the other direction,
deeper into woods, while twigs
tick like an overheated engine cooling.

DAVID GRAHAM

THE DAY I CANNOT STOP CRYING

Speck dazzling one eye, lens glint of sun,
maybe fumes from underground engines
that power our day—whatever it is,
my nerves know this blur will last daylong,
fogging half my hours, a grief without source.

Let the turning maple swim, red and rust,
in my right eye—my left has no time
for this driveling riddle, this *Weltschmerz*.
I read the news with proper irony,
tidal waves against the crisp columns
of disaster, treaty, and no comment.
I'm half inclined to resurrect my soul
from its lifelong torpor, to float my sins
and almost hurl myself down that dark well.

Clogged tear duct? Partial allergy? Remnant
of sorrow, lodged at last where I cannot
think it away? This welling semi-world
would seem too deep for tears were it not
lovingly abrim, and I feel yes and no
at war within, like a father seeing
his truant son take a deserved beating.

Do I sadden because I am crying
or vice versa? Do I worry the rage
of every smudged headline? Someone does or
does not slice an onion in my bad kitchen,
and I know the beam in my eye is a mote
in the camera lens of history.
But I won't cry for that. I cry despite
myself, and not because rain is the sweat
of the damned, not because good citizens

must climb their roof crests to ride out the flood
of this last hurricane's one-eyed blinking.

To the north the thunderheads thicken—
bikinis and tennis weather to the south.
Why, when the metal of responsible life
lies sweet in its sheath, must I know this split
that is itself half pain, half theatric?

I cry with half a heart that one whole eye
takes in the world's wind, refusing to blink.

SELF-PORTRAIT WITH STAGE FRIGHT

This isn't my real personality
standing up half casually
to talk about myself. Usually
I'm sparrow-skittery,
shy as water through
my own fingers—
just ask my mother,
if you can find her; that's her
hunched in the back row
or two steps from the door.

Usually dew glazes my lip
when everyone's looking,
sleet thrums my stomach,
a regular hailstorm
in my knees.

What can I give you
but dark inklings
you already know
or a twinge or two
out of history? What is
my stammering hello
but code for farewell?

Wouldn't you rather watch
buzzards circle their roosting tree?
Without past, without regard
they swirl as black snowflakes
in one of those bubble villages
that live on coffee tables.

Shake them and they perform.
Shake me and I'm gone.

WILLIAM GREENWAY

OUR FATHER WHO ART ON THIRD

After all, he said to himself, it is probably only insomnia.
Many must have it.
"A Clean, Well-Lighted Place"

I stopped praying years ago, learned how
to think instead of love, or the icy mountains before
death, green fields beyond. Now I need
a quiet god, not to make the heart rattle,
a golf ball in a cup. Baseball fits best,
almost as if designed in sleep: the pickoff, brush
back, squeeze, suicide squeeze, stealing. It's no
heaven—it's here: slick skin and stitches of the ball
in hand reminding me of Ebba St. Clair, Atlanta
Cracker catcher built like crossed trees, showing us
how to throw, the ball an egg in the knotted
roots of his fingers. If he never made it, how
can we? Yet I wear before sleep the welts
and wrinkles of a glove, dream hand, grip the bone
handle of a Louisville Slugger, slap clay
from my spikes and go toward the dark as to
home, playing for the bunt, the sacrifice.

THE BEST DAYS OF YOUR LIFE

All those commercials pushing zest, out
lusting each other for life. Soon they'll come
on holding a can and have a fit, as if last
second a million beings hadn't died.
There. Another legion, souls fizzing
from cancers like tire air, an extra
thousand little brown balloons gone
from the lands where the dirt is cracked
like lips. Next second or the next a billion
bugs will conclude, applauded from
this life, round off incarnations, they
hope, fireflies shush into dark like matches
in water, small animals furred and shelled just
pop on the highways, champagne
corks on the edge of a new
year that's always happening, interstates
of hearts stop, seizing black engines
out of oil. Slugged bodies falling down
the sky, bulldozed, floating up, blood
vessels puffing and splitting, but you'd never
know by watching television, which is why
they talk about life being such a wonderful
thing, and it is, at least mine is.

SUSAN KAPLAN

THE SERVANT'S CHOICE

Better here than the parallel choice
of days appraising crackle-ware
for her summer home,
I, obliger, have,
at least, gallons to rearrange.
A grainy everything pollutes my towel.

My sweet lady asks me to stay outside
the Pacific's waves, but I wade a dozen creepers
to fill my thermos with a roller's top.
Really, I need a faucet to rinse
these never to be elm-like shells
I can't match. I am building
a nonperishable nature.

I am in charge of what the water has;
if there are clouds, I diagnose them too.
But this is August with its untriggered skies.
A paradigm of imps romps nearby
eating melons carelessly.
Clumps of sugar pickle the sand.

The lady whom I worry warns me—
I am not to plow with my hands;
I am not to search for seedlings
in the soggy inches between me and the shore
where there are ugly vegetables
and fish foods I don't want
or want to preserve.

She suggests I take to the crags instead, "Because
they are already homely," she adds,
not knowing that unearthing is my science,

that I perforate the horizon,
will smudge my fingers green with lawn
to reuse the touchable ground.

The earth could re-earth a pound of creation,
a handbag full of up-roots,
before her concern for my aptitude returns.
She has already lost the small wrecks of tides
I found for her last spring.
If rediscovered, I'll flag.
My fitness is growing an eerie weight.

BRUCE BERGER

TRANSMIGRATION

As kerosene climbs through a wick,
Or sap through oak by the slow
Fire of evaporation,
So moisture from the saltpan
Has scaled the flesh and feathers
Of this long-fallen crow,
And seeded it with crystals.
Alone with its blue shadow
As if on a shield of snow,
Half scavenger with a tough beak,
Now more than half a vessel
That might have served Versailles,
It challenges the sun
With a blistering salt eye,
Easy in the wisdom
That its fellows are nothing at all,
Serene in its lucky fall,
Its dazzling transmigration
From bird to the stabler kingdom
Of the gem and mineral.

GREG KUZMA

From TRANSLATIONS FROM THE ENGLISH

FROST AT MIDNIGHT

Whose woods these are
I used to care.
His house is in the village there.
He will not see me stop to stare
in this place which my horse finds queer.
My guess is I could stay a year
were it not for others there
whose promises I have to keep.
These woods are lovely dark and deep,
though parts of them have made me weep,
and lonely on my way to sleep.
My little horse cares not a lot
for going home or staying here.
He whistles softly in my ear,
and thinks the snow is not so dear,
but he would have the barn so near
around him where he longs to stop.
This outside business not for him
at such an hour dark and drear,
and with my eyesight growing dim
he wishes he could call me Jim
and kick me homeward at a trot.
He wishes maybe I were him,
and felt the spurs along my flank,
and had my money in the bank,
my feet in snow and not his own,
with kitchen warm and telephone,
and me his stall to ponder in.
That might be good for both of us,
that switching places in the snow,
that dreaming of it as we go.

But I would have us as we are,
both who we are and where we are,
and would remind him sad but sure
this is the era of the car,
and only luck he has me here
upon his back or at rein-length,
and not some modern-out-of-school
whose only wisdom is some rule
that makes him seem beyond a fool,
and science as his only strength.
I would remind him had I breath
for talking how I might have gone
and sold him for what little cash
his sorry death
could bring to hand.
But I do not.
I rather like him, I confess,
who thinks too much of what it was
brought us both here this wretched night
and both of us at such duress
with winter fully lodged about
so that we strayed beyond the light
of city street and factory blight
so much of late upon our land,
but I digress.

ROBERT BLY

Give me a really obscure place
like Missoula Montana
any day
over say being mugged on a subway
near the main offices of Holt Rinehart
and Winston.

My students say, "He wakes up
happy in Missoula, though it is
nowhere." "He wakes up happy and

finds he's in Missoula, and has
missed his stop. He is the kind of
man enjoys being in the wrong place."
"He wakes up, looks around himself
and sees the dust on the window of
the train. And he is in Missoula."

I have been grading essays
all afternoon. I wish I were in
Missoula. The trout streams
are just coming to life, the snows
are not so silent on the fields and
mountains, but rather form brooks and
run down quick and silver into the
trout streams. There is a man
opening his sporting goods store,
getting ready for trout season.
He has just received a shipment
of new landing nets. He sets out
the display.

Robert Bly has just awakened at his
farm in Minnesota. It is morning,
clear and cold. He rises
and shaves, sits down to a big
breakfast. Today is the day
he begins his reading tour
of the Eastern colleges.

AI

My father is out in the yard
on his hands and knees picking up
walnut shells. There is a two by four
lying against the barn. I pick it up
and smash it with all my might
into his skull. He slumps over
onto his back, blood pours from his

lips and ear.
Oh I love ya honey and I always will.
He sits, the man with long dark fingers,
and strums the strings.
We kiss and he says, Bake bread baby.
I go in and bake the bread.
It is strange, like drying brains
to my hands.
He lays the long knife by the purple napkin
and all during dinner it winks at me.
Midnight I rip out his throat from ear to ear.
Then shovel the crumpled body down the stairs.
How I love ya honey and I always will.

GALAWAY KINNELL MEETS RICHARD EBERHART

Take the wolf ribs sharpened on both ends.
Embed the wolf ribs in whale fat.
Tie a long chain between the wolf ribs.
Go to the edge of the cliff.
Get the two bears snapping at the whale fat blobs.
Toss the blobs and the bears off the cliff.
Cheer as they fall, as they fly.

JOHN CIARDI

A TRENTA-SEI OF THE PLEASURE WE TAKE IN THE EARLY DEATH OF KEATS

It is old school custom to pretend to be sad
when we think about the early death of Keats.
The species-truth of the matter is we are glad.
Psilanthropic among exegetes,
I am so moved that when the plate comes by
I almost think to pay the God—but why?

When we think about the early death of Keats
we are glad to be spared the bother of dying ourselves.
His poems are a candy store of bitter-sweets.
We munch whole flights of angels from his shelves
drooling a sticky glut, almost enough
to sicken us. But what delicious stuff!

The species-truth of the matter is we are glad
to have a death to munch on. Truth to tell,
we are also glad to pretend it makes us sad.
When it comes to dying, Keats did it so well
we thrill to the performance. Safely here,
this side of the fallen curtain, we stand and cheer.

Psilanthropic among exegetes,
as once in a miles-high turret spitting flame,
I watched boys flower through orange winding sheets
and shammed a mourning because it put a name
to a death I might have taken—which in a way
made me immortal for another day.

I was so moved that when the plate came by
I had my dollar in hand to give to death
but changed to a penny—enough for the old guy,
and almost enough saved to sweeten my breath
with a toast I will pledge to the Ape of the Divine
in thanks for every death that spares me mine.

I almost thought of paying the God—but why?
Had the boy lived, he might have grown as dull
as Tennyson. Far better, I say, to die
and leave us a formed feeling. O beautiful,
pale, dying poet, fading as soft as rhyme,
the saddest music keeps the sweetest time.

COMMENT

JOHN CIARDI: THE MANY LIVES OF POETRY

This essay is a shortened version of a Cockefaire Chair Lecture delivered at The University of Missouri in Kansas City in April, ten days before the death of John Ciardi, who had inaugurated the chair two years before.

It is not easy to know, when about to explore the poetry of John Ciardi, where to enter so diverse a region and how to proceed when once there. It is hardly too much to say that here—as Dryden said of Chaucer—here is God's plenty. There are similarities with Chaucer: the record of a pilgrimage, the many interests, the amused warm tolerance for human folly so long as it is neither cruel nor pretentious. Chaucer too was a man of affairs, worldly wise in a time when men were inclined to be more spiritual than now. We may think of the poet as being maladroit, like Baudelaire's albatross, once he leaves his airy realm and comes down to earth. But many have been effective when dealing with things of this world; we would have to put John Ciardi among them. If you wanted advice on the stock market, he could give it to you. If you wanted to know about real estate values or the best buy in a used car, he could tell you. If you wanted to know how to raise roses or get rid of moles in your lawn, he knew that too. If he had inherited the mom and pop grocery on the corner, likely enough he would have developed it into a worldwide chain. If he had gone into politics, he might have been our Governor Cuomo. Only a strong commitment to poetry prevented him from realizing some of the abilities he has sacrificed for it. The multifarious interests, the many lives he has led, account for the variety of his poetry, and for the difficulty of covering it in a hasty survey.

"The many lives of poetry." In an early birthday poem he speaks of

> An album of myself . . .
>   seen year by year
> Posed in the changing fashions of its skin . . .

and a quarter of a century later he confesses, "I was not able to make one life of all / the presences I haunted . . . ." At every age he has been, like Montaigne, a student of himself. He has been a soldier and then a householder, observing a quieter world from his patio. Through these observations he has become a naturalist and particularly an ornithologist, the very Audubon of poets. Always he has had a sharp eye for what is authentic and what is pretentious in the human creature; watching it, he could hardly fail to be at times a satirist. Books have been part of his life from his earliest years; he is known as a scholar, a word-watcher, an adventurous and entertaining etymologist. He has been a translator, a teacher, a lecturer, an editor, the author of a dozen or more books for children. A citizen, a political commentator. "I am an actor too," he says in *Lives of X*. He calls himself "a missionary bee / sucking for souls." He even says, "Were I to dramatize myself,"

> I'd say I am a theologian who keeps meeting
> the devil as a master of make-up. . . .

A missionary? a theologian? It is a little hard to see Ciardi wearing, together with his twenty or more other hats, the kind of biretta worn by the priests of his childhood. If he ever had worn one, we can be sure that he would have transformed it into a cardinal's hat, and been active in running the Mafia out of Sicily—unless indeed he had become head of it.

Through the *persona* of Leonardo da Vinci he once wrote:

> You know how or you don't. But to know how
>
> is first to be born of a people, to be
> the bearer of their seed—son, husband, father.

These are the lives—those of son, husband, father, with the sense of being born of a people—that we will glance at first in what might be thought of as our Ciardi sampler, our little anthology of the pleasures his work affords us.

The poet finds what are probably the deepest and truest sources of his work in the emotions that give us poems of three generations. All are *dynamic* relationships—I wondered briefly if *dynastic* would be too pompous a word. The author of *A Browser's Dictionary* would know that both words come from the same root—and that there is *dynamite* in that family. I was reassured to find that he himself had used *dynastic* in his "Letter to Mother," the first poem in his first book:

> And it is good to remember that this blood, in
> another body, your body, arrived.
> There is dynastic example in a single generation
> of this blood, and the example good. . . .

In fact, more than three generations are present. There are poems that go back to a grandfather in Italy,

> Father's father,
> photographer- and Sunday-scrubbed and scarved,
> Sorrento painted behind him . . .

and to a grandmother who "in *her* tribe's dark, kept herbs and spells / and studied signs and dreams. . . ."

The first section of *Selected Poems* is called "Tribal Poems," as was a section of *As If* almost thirty years before. Several members of the tribe are as colorful as Aunt Mary, who "loved us till we screamed" and who died of eating twelve red peppers, fried in oil, after a hard day's work, thereby undergoing "red-hot transformation / from gluttony into embalmer's calm."

Dominant in the poems of family feeling is the mother. Thirty-five years after that early "Letter to Mother," *The Little That Is All* was dedicated to her "in loving memory." But from the very beginning the love between mother and son is never without tension. "Letter to Mother" can say, "It was good, it was all good." But it can also say, "Mother, I can promise you nothing." Passionate and simple, from a hearty peasant background, the mother was "instinctual," says her son, "as peasantry breeds in any Apennines. . . ." He was just as passionate, but without her background—growing up as he did amid books, classes, the excitements of city life in a new land. He found he could not continue to share, for one thing, the unquestioning fervor of her Catholicism:

> Once on a shelf
> a candle lit a plaster saint
> and I knelt in a blaze of self.
> The reek of guilt would leave me faint
> where my mad mother stretched my soul. . . .

Nor could his mother share all of his interests:

By flashlight under the covers
. . . there
in the cave safe from Mother,
I read my eyes out of my head. . . .

Some of her practices would have seemed superstitious to the citizens of her adopted country, although their own ancestors had been just as superstitious not so many decades before:

When we poured
concrete for a new house, she leaned over
the half-filled forms muttering,
and dropped in a penny, a crucifix, a key,
then pricked her finger and shook out
a drop of blood. . . .
She was using everything she knew anything
about, and she knew she was using it.

"That," her son comments, "is my kind of savage," for her superstitions were based on blood and bone and the vitality of her beliefs, not just on the number 13 or black cats or ladders or the meaningless obsessions of people walking the streets—"ritualists," the poet calls them, "without conviction."

The love between mother and son was complicated because husband and father had been killed, when the child was only three, in a traffic accident—a loss that "maddened the woman, and then wasted her witless," a loss "that had been the blood / and error and evil of all my Mother's tears. . . ." More and more she saw the father in the son; more and more he saw that his "best chance was to play the husband" and (especially on those occasions when she was punishing him) to win her over with his rough affection. "Then *she*'d cry, / and I'd have to stop bawling to comfort *her*." He came to be protective not only as a husband might have been, but even as a father. As she grew weak and fey with age, he could say, "I think perhaps this woman is my child." Perhaps her son's best tribute to her is in *Lives of X*:

history's daughter
tall from her root of love, my comic source,
my radiant witch of first-made lunacies,
and priestess of the tongues before a man. . . .

The poet can hardly have remembered his father, who was felt, however, as a powerful presence: "the deepest grave I know." In "My Father Died Imperfect as a Man," we read

> My mother lied him to perfections . . .
>
> So history lied my father from his death,
> she having no history that would let him be
> imperfect and worth keeping vigils with.
> She made a saint of him. And she made me
>
> kneel to him every night. When I was bad
> he shadowed me. And always knew my lies.
> I was too young to know him, but my bed
> lay under him and God, and both their eyes
>
> bored through the dark to damn me as I was. . . .

Much of what he remembered was an imaginative creation, as when he described how his father, out of his savings, had bought "ten piny lots" in the country, which he liked to visit on Sunday and make plans for:

> when he sat on a stone with his wine-jug and cheese beside him,
> his collar and coat on a branch, his shirt open,
> his derby back on his head like a standing turtle. A big
> man he was. When he sang *Celeste Aida* the woods
> filled as if a breeze were swelling through them. . . .
>
> —Well, I have lied. Not so much lied as dreamed it. . . .

In a time when the vogue was for children to enjoy composing, and profiting from, exposés of their parents, Ciardi, though aware of shortcomings, could regard his own with admiration, respect, and love; it is with something like exaltation that he proclaims: "I am the son of this man and this woman."

In *Selected Poems*, the "Tribal Poems" are followed by a group called "I Marry You" (the title of a 1958 volume), subtitled "A Sheaf of Love Poems." In the last of the group, the poet returns to his tribal memories:

> My father did read some. But it was
> his mountain he came from, not the mind
> of man. He had ritual, not ideas. . . .

Such ancestral pieties also inform the love poems; marital love as consecrated by ritual is the theme of more than one of them. "Epithalamion After a War" begins, "Now by a ritual of legality / You are my flesh's darling, my mind's encounter. . . ." Of the dozen or so love poems in *I Marry You*, only four are reprinted in *Selected Poems*. Is that because love poems are harder to write, and for that reason less likely to succeed, than other tribal poems—particularly when they are poems of happy love, as these are? When Keats babbles about

> More happy love, more happy, happy love
> Forever warm and still to be enjoyed . . .

he is looking not at flesh and blood but at ceramic figures, their imagined emotions far above "all breathing human passion." We must all have noticed that there are fewer poems—though more verse—about blissful love than about love star-crossed or unrequited. The lover who feels fulfilled has other things to do than moon over his typewriter. As Yeats says, had he been happy in love, he "might have thrown poor words away / And been content to live." The difficulty is that poems of happy love, having few ironies to invoke, may seem not only simple-hearted but simple-minded. The poems to Ciardi's mother, also poems of love, are gripping because they are not simply poems of "more happy, happy love"; they are poems about the interplay between love and what threatens to destroy it. But the poems of *I Marry You* seem to offer the most untroubled and luminous vistas in all of the poetry. The beauty of the loved woman is described as the stuff of which all legend is made: "There is no other body in all myth. . . ."

But since beauty is a magnet for evil as well as for good, myth does not confine itself to the annals of happiness. When Yeats warns, "there's a light in Troy," he is not referring to the glory of Helen's hair. Something of the same feeling is in our poet's praise of his love: "The raiders' ships / All sailed to your one port. . . ." In these poems, the electric charge is not in the love, which is unclouded, but in the lover, sometimes torn between the spiritual and the sensuous:

> Bravo and monk (the heads and tails of love)
> I stand, a spinning coin of wish and dread. . . .

Or it is in reality itself. In the most moving poems, there is a realization of the conflict between timeless and legendary beauty and the contingency, the chanciness, of an existence made up of whatever is begotten, born, and dies. This is the thought of the love poem whose first line is its title:

> The deaths about you when you stir in sleep
> hasten me toward you. Out of the bitter mouth
> that sours the dark, I sigh for what we are. . . .

The chill of apprehension is felt also in "To Judith Asleep":

> . . . my fear and miser's panic
> That time shall have you last, and legendry
> Undress to old bones from its moon brocade. . . .

Yet the realization that love is imperiled, that time must have a stop, teaches us to cherish what we cannot long possess. That realization sparks a defiance that is, at least for the moment, a protection against the conturbations of *timor mortis*. In "Men Marry What They Need. I Marry You," this defiance is explicit:

> I marry you from time and a great door
> is shut and stays shut against wind, sea, stone . . .
> I marry you by all dark and all dawn
>
> And have my laugh at death.

After the marriage poems we have poems to the children. Ciardi has written about as many books for children as for us overgrowns—but I think not many poems about them. Is it because it is as hard to write children-poems as to write love poems? Are the tots too cute and adorable—at least in the verse about them? Swinburne saw them that way, as in the poem he had the nerve to call "Étude Réaliste," which begins:

> A baby's feet, like sea-shells pink,
> Might tempt, should heaven see meet,
> An angel's lips to kiss, we think,
> A baby's feet. . . .

Gerard Manley Hopkins, poet and holy man, admitted that such "rot about babies" made him see things King Herod's way.

But as the children grow older and more refractory, dramatic tensions begin and the interest picks up. The poet finds himself, in regard to them, in the position his mother was in toward him. But, perhaps because of his own early experience, he has more understanding and tolerance than her traditions permitted her to have. The father-son polarity is felt first in "Boy":

> He is in his room sulked shut. The small
> pouts of his face clenched. His tears
> as close to holy water as I recall
> any font shining. A boy, and fierce
> in his sacrament, father-forced this two-
> faced way love has.

Racked by the need for extending sympathy and for enforcing discipline, the father concludes:

> I confess
> I don't know my own reasons or own way.
> May sons forgive the fathers they obey.

Later poems are about forgiving, but with an amused tolerance he had not quite learned when he wrote "Boy." What gives the poems to his son Benn, like those to his mother, their credibility is their upsetting candor. In all of the family poems we are in the presence of a spirit warm, tolerant, sympathetic, forgiving. But never blindly so; it sees, but makes allowance for, the imperfections in all of us. In "My Father Died Imperfect as a Man" is the sentence, "Love must intend realities." Ten years later, in *The Little That Is All*, it became the substance of the one-liner called "Exit Line": "Love should intend realities.—Good-bye." Ten more years, and the poet returns to the insistent "must" in *Selected Poems*. But with the people he loved, though he saw the realities almost too vividly, it was never "Good-bye". A truer summary of his feelings is to be found just a few lines from the end of the "Epilogue" to *Lives of X*: "Let what I love outlive me and all's well."

There is one life he is closer to than to any of these: his own. "Closer," he says, "than mother and son." He regards himself with not only the same unsparing honesty as he regards others, but with a frankness that is ironic, if not openly sarcastic. Looking at a photo of the soldier he was, he can say,

> The sgt. stands so fluently in leather,
> So poster-holstered and so newsreel-jawed . . .
> My civil memory is overawed.

The "fine bravura look of calm," he confesses, is a deception. The poet allows himself no heroics in his own regard. There are several poems of self-criticism, or even of self-derision. In "Coming Home on the 5:22," he can mock the "prosperous well-tailored plump / middle-aged man" he has become, showing off by leaping from the train before it comes to a stop. That incident leads to further self-analysis:

> How did this fat and foolish man
> come over me? He is not I.
> Yet I am he, though I began
> as something else. When did I die?
> Well, tell the truth: not I but they.
> All those I tried in prayer or play,
>
> Like trying on a self . . .
>
> I used to say this sort of thing to God.
> He didn't like an idiot for a son.
> I wasn't pleased myself, so I changed style . . . .

A poet, in writing about himself, becomes a divided personality: observer and observed. "No mind can engender till divided into two," said Yeats, who also observed that "We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry." A dramatic example of the poet quarreling with himself is Ciardi's "Tenzone." The title is literary, one of only two or three such in *Selected Poems*. It could allow us a pedantic romp into fields of genre, source, influence, parallels. "Tenzone" is a two-part poem: in the first part Soul accuses Body of abandoning the higher reality that it, the Soul, aspires to, and of corrupting its talent, if any, to devote itself to such earthy pleasures as big cars, bourbon, good clothes, "cash, freeloading, and the more expensive bitches." "He actually likes it here," Soul concludes in disgust. In the second part, Body, in matching stanzas, answers the "eternalist of boneyards" by saying that Soul by itself is ineffective,

> a glowworm. A spook. A half-strung zither
> with a warped sounding box. . . .

At any rate no poet, because "the poem is belly and bone." In defiance of Soul, Body admits that it does want the physicality of the here and now:

> And, *yes*, I want it all—
> grab, gaggle, and rut—as sure as death's no breather.

The poem will remind us of Yeats's "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," which, though in imagery and diction very different, is a similar debate. As Yeats has My Self say,

> I am content to live it all again
> And yet again, if it be life to pitch
> Into the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch . . . ,

so Ciardi has Body say to Soul:

> Yes, I like it here. Make it twenty times worse
> and I'd still do it over again, even with you
> like a monkey on my back. . . .

In the most recent of his dual poems, in which the poet wakes up "inanely happy," there is a joyful reconciliation between the mind and its "animal." The poem is called "Happiness"; it is appropriately the first poem in his most recent book. The two poems that follow it, equally exultant, are "The Glory" and "Praise."

As a gunner in a B-29 in the South Pacific, Ciardi had another kind of life, close to death. The poems that deal with these experiences remind us more of the starkness of Wilfred Owen than of the romanticism of Rupert Brooke: grim accounts of bomber missions and their casualties, of what goes on in the mind of a downed pilot in an isolated jungle, or of one who, without provisions on his rubber raft, drifts in mid-ocean toward his lonely death. These accounts are not preserved in the *Selected Poems*. The only poem there that copes with the reality of modern war is "The Graph," from *Lives of X*. In this he can confess, "I studied dying all that year," and can tell us what some of the lessons were like:

> I practiced thinking I had died last week
> and could relax with nothing more to lose.
> Still in the night sweat before every mission
> a wet rag whispered: "By this time tomorrow
> you may have burned to death. . . ."

Another time he found himself in a cave facing a concretion of corpses that had been charred to mummies by the flame-throwers. In the open mouth of one was a living rat, working there like an obscene tongue. But only in that poem is there so grim a glance at the horrors of war. Ciardi plays down the heroics, and his own part in them. His epigraph for the group of war poems in *As If* is a line from Melville's "The March into Virginia": "All wars are boyish, and are fought by boys. . . ."

He saw integrity and heroism in those campaigns, and gave them the honor they deserve. If the spirit of irony seems to prevail, it is because he saw so clearly the difference between the heroic and the heroics. His attitude was no less ironic toward himself, as we see in his best known war poems, "Elegy Just in Case" and "On a Photo of Sgt. Ciardi a Year Later." Long after the war he wrote a poem with the title, "Ten Years Ago When I Played at Being Brave." His final comment on that period of his life would seem to be the title he gave the section of war poems in his *Selected Poems*: he called it "Bang Bang."

A life the poet lived after the war is referred to in the title of a poem in *From Time to Time*: "Image of Man as a Gardener After Two World Wars." It begins:

> In the dead hour of the afternoon,
> When the sun has overshot the sky
> . . . I stand
> Hosing, householding my lawn.

In poem after poem we see the poet as householder. In *Selected Poems*, a group subtitled "On the Patio" has twice as many poems as the "Bang Bang" section. It is there that he can say, "Now I sit / Happy to look at what I look at. . . ." In these poems the ironies are quieted. Much of what he looks at is in the landscaping around the patio. No mere chaise lounge gardener, he knows and lets us know the sometimes painful pleasure of working with soil, compost, burlap, wax, a grafting knife.

One of the poems in *From Time to Time* is called "The Cartographer of Meadows." Looking at nature first from near the house, he begins to be a naturalist in the wider world, scanning with scientific exactness what is to be seen there. Everything is specific: "I have never seen," one poem insists, "a generalized blue jay." When he looks at bees he sees them not merely as a buzzy blur, but as "hunchback bees in pirate pants and with peg-leg / hooks. . . ." When he sees a deer, neck-deep in mist, he does not see just a moving head. He sees "A brown swan with a mythic twist of antlers. . . ."

Ciardi's nature poems are rare, like Frost's, in that they are based on the realities of nature. The writers of sentimental verse like to fancy that birds are talking to *us*, really piping sweet somethings in our ear. Frost—and Ciardi—know better. As Frost writes in "The Hill Wife,"

> One ought not to have to care
>   So much as you and I
> Care when the birds come round the house
>   Or seem to say good-by;
>
> Or care so much when they come back
>   With whatever it is they sing. . . .

Whatever it is! Ciardi knows too that whatever there is between man and the rest of nature, it is not rational communication. He "intends realities" when he looks at the world, just as when he looks at the people in it. He is unsentimental in recognizing that nature is by no means always endearing. We are surrounded by oddities, mysteries, horrors. One section of *Selected Poems* is called "Thickets"—looking at nature, we are always looking into a thicket of the inscrutable. "Thoughts on Looking into a Thicket" has to do with a spider who resorts to one of the strangest and unseemliest of camouflages—it can make itself look like bird droppings, to attract butterflies and such who regard that as their gourmet fare. Planning to eat, they light there and are eaten.

Frost is reported to have said that he had never written a nature poem. He too took what he needed from wild nature to tell us something about our human nature, often no less wild.

We might be surprised to find that in *I Marry You*, which is subtitled "A Sheaf of Love Poems," the first poem ("Snowy Heron") after the dedicatory one is about a bird. It begins: "What lifts the heron leaning on the air / I praise without a name. . . ." St. Francis, seeing "the heron on his two soft kissing kites," might have praised God for it. "Cry anything you please," says the poem, "But praise. By any name or none / . . . And doubt all else. But praise." In the same "Sheaf of Love Poems" is "Two Egrets," birds that are

like two white hands
washing one another
in the prime of light. . . .

What the two, there in their "lit heaven," remind the poet of is "a prayer / and the idea of prayer."

These nature poems, then, are really love poems, poems of the praise which is prayer. Even in the poem about the spider dabbling in its mucky *trompe l'oeil*, the poet professes: "I believe in the world to praise it. I believe / the act in its own occurrence." If the birds of the world could get together (as in Chaucer's "The Parlement of Foules") to pick a laureate for their nation, they might well pick John Ciardi, among his other lives a knowledgeable ornithologist. He mentions many kinds of birds, as we might expect from one who in his "Bird Watching" tells how he thumbs through a field guide to identify one that is a

miracle while it
is happening, and then instantly incredible forever. . . .

Gulls seem to have been an early favorite, "ultimate bird / everywhere and everything pure wing and wind / are. . . ." But later on there are mentions of birds more likely to be seen from the patio or in the neighborhood, birds of at least a dozen different species. These are by no means all of the birds on his life list; there are also birds imagined or read about: the dodo, the Rhino-bird. The sight of even a dead bird "pasted to muck" inspires his "Small Elegy"—seventy lines and more, not one of them mawkish, leading to deeper considerations:

Have I lost most by wanting less?
I have not happened anywhere
on more regret than I could lose,
nor on more love than I could bear;
nor on more pity than I could give
the small sad days to which we live.

In "Back Home in Pompeii" birds stand for the animation that was buried under ash and lava:

Back home in Pompeii
birds crunched underfoot,
stones flew away,
statues began to bow. . . .

Twenty-five years later, the lines gave a title to his 1985 volume, *The Birds of Pompeii.*

A reference to birds can take us into yet another of his lives. About the warbler of "In Some Doubt but Willingly," he writes:

What an engine this dawn
has going for it on
the limb I cannot find. . . .

Very well: the bird is an admirable little engine. But for engines in general—and in his work generalities turn to particulars—he has a limited admiration. There are exceptions. Possibly remembering his father's death in a traffic accident, he does like the safety of big cars. When he mentions a brand name, it is likely to be Cadillac. In his "Memo: Preliminary Draft of a Prayer to God the Father," he can say:

Thank you for the expensive car, its weight and
  sure tread
that makes it reasonable to go reasonably fast. . . .

In spite of his war experiences, he seems comfortable with the planes that take him so many places:

There is no cloud I cannot mount +
and sip good bourbon as I ride. . . .

The power mower that helps civilize the environs of the patio comes in for several mentions; it is the subject of his "On the Orthodoxy and Creed of My Power Mower"—a title that illustrates his tendency to ascend from particulars to a more reflective and imaginative level. In the poem, the power mower is a dangerous beast, needing to be wheedled and placated by its priest from the service department. Though fascinated by its might, the poet is not wholly at ease with this frenzied thing. Twenty-five years before, he had similar misgivings about farm machinery at harvest:

> Look: there are monsters in the wheat
> . . . all an enormous mouth . . .
> Contraptions of intestines, a surreal sex,
> A planned miscarriage, a hybrid, spit-and-gum
> Lopsided, cockeyed, mad, impossible theorem
>
> That works. Or almost works. . . .

Confronted by many products of the modern world, Ciardi is contentedly behind the times. In "Obsolescence" he expresses his discomfort with "an Omni-Function Digital Synchro-Mesh / Alarm wrist watch that beeps *Caro nome* / (also available with *Vissi d'arte*)." He prefers the old ways of telling time:

> I know time only as a circle. Star time.
> Rotation and orbit time. Dark and lit as tides. . . .
>
> Because I am obsolete, I cannot read it.

As obsolete, he is in many ways Horace's "laudator temporis acti se puero"—a praiser of the good old days, when he was a boy. Most satirists are. Ciardi not only distrusts some of the products of the modern age; he also has a shrewd eye for its follies. When one is as sharp an observer of humanity as he is, one cannot fail to be indignant; indignation can inspire verses, said Juvenal, if all else fails—not that anything else has failed our poet. We have seen a good deal of irony at his own expense: satiric views of himself as soldier, himself as prosperous citizen. The vein of satire grows stronger in the later books. It is directed at Washington, D.C., and its leaders in such jabberwocky-like poems as the "Ballad of the Icondic" (Ike and Dick), at the Internal Revenue Service, at people who build air-raid shelters in their back yards (he once said he was going to build a platform out there, take up a bottle of bourbon, and settle down to watch the spectacular finale). He has poems against officialdom and bureaucracy, against red tape and blue movies, against those who administer cultural programs. As a poet who watches the language and believes in "his own profession, which is in praise / of the enlarging word," he is especially sensitive to mishandlings of the language that turn it into cant and jargon. "Elegy Just in Case" burlesques the officialese with which next of kin are informed:

"Missing as of inst. oblige,
Deepest sorrow and remain—"

A recent example of this kind of satire takes a line from Dante as its title, "Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore," in order to parody, by reducing to an absurdity, the trivialization of emotion by our psychosocial jargon. The title contrasts modern interfacing with the romantic but idealistic love that Dante is exalting in *La Vita Nuova*; it is the first line of the famous canzone whose opening might be translated as

Ladies, who have understanding of what love is,
I wish to speak to you about my lady,
Not that I can ever praise her enough. . . .

It goes on to say such things as

An angel in heaven offers a prayer, in the mind of God,
Saying, "Lord, down on earth is to be seen
A creature so marvellous in the effulgence
Of her soul that the splendor is felt even up here.
Heaven, in which nothing is lacking except that
She be here with us, implores you, Lord,
To convey her hither, and so prays every saint. . . .

The modern couple talk like this:

Mary and I were having an emotion.
"Thank you for having this emotion with me,"
Mary said, "I needed a reinforcement
of my identity through an interaction.
Have you accomplished a viable realization?"

"I know it was a formative experience,"
I said to Mary, "and yet, as I critique it
at my own level, I still feel under-achieved. . . ."

"Is that susceptible of remediation. . .?
May I suggest
a release-therapy impromptu now,
and a more fully structured enactment later?"

They go on to talk about how "an optimal interpersonal encounter should emphasize mutuality" and how "approval is to be strongly indicated as tendency re-inforcement in trait development . . . relating fully to . . . raised consciousness. . . ." Our poet concludes with a prayer: "O intellect of love, may I prove worthy!"

There are other lives of Ciardi I wish I could consider: his life as fantasist or fabulist, for instance, as expressed in such poems as "In the Hole." Or the lives he has imagined himself into: those of Ulysses, Launcelot, Hamlet, Leonardo—many others. Or his life as guardian of the language, as shown in his talks on public broadcasting and in the volumes of *A Browser's Dictionary*. Or his life as translator of one of the noblest of poets. Or his life as observer of the process of writing, as revealed in such poems as "An Apology for Not Invoking the Muse," in which he and Erato, Muse of lyric and love poetry, have a discussion about talent, in which he is much too modest, or as revealed in "An Interruption," in which he and Aphrodite have a talk. She is not one of the nine licensed Muses, though she does like to horn in on their function; Ciardi probably likes to hobnob with a Muse who is not Establishment.

The life that has united all of these other lives, that has made them liveable and will make them live, is of course his life as poet. Though I have not dwelt specifically on this life, I hope that this little anthology of quotations has given some notion of its richness. I do not believe I know of another poet of the time who has more unsparingly translated the events and interests of his several lives into poetry, or another of whom it might more accurately be said, as a great predecessor said of his own life work,

> Camerado, this is no book,
> Who touches this touches a man.

JOHN FREDERICK NIMS

CONTRIBUTORS

THOMAS CARPER has been performing with a Renaissance a cappella choral group, the Cornish Trio, the last few months. He teaches English at the University of Southern Maine, in Gorham.

TOM DISCH had two new works out this spring: *The Brave Little Toaster: A Bedtime Story for Small Appliances*, his first children's book; and *Amnesia*, a computer-interactive novel. He lives in New York City.

ALLEN GINSBERG* has a new collection, *White Shroud: Poems 1981–1985*, scheduled for publication in September by Harper & Row.

JUDITH SKILLMAN* is a business communication instructor, mother, and writer, living in Bellevue, Washington. Her work has appeared in several little magazines, and last year she was a finalist in the Discovery/*The Nation* competition.

ROBERT N. FEINSTEIN* is a retired research biochemist, with a Ph.D. from Wisconsin. Besides over eighty publications in scientific journals, he has contributed light verse to many magazines and newspapers, including *The Wall Street Journal* and *Christian Science Monitor*.

ALBERT GOLDBARTH's new collection, *Arts and Sciences*, is due from Ontario Review Press in October; it will include several poems originally printed here. He teaches at the University of Texas, Austin.

BEN HOWARD's *Northern Interior: Poems 1975–1982* is scheduled for fall publication by The Cummington Press, which will issue his *Lenten Anniversaries: Poems 1982–1985* next year. Many of the poems in both volumes first appeared in *Poetry*. He is Margaret and Barbara Hagar Professor in Humanities at Alfred University.

BILL MEISSNER* directs the creative writing program at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota. His work has appeared in some 100 literary journals since 1970, and this fall Ohio University Press will publish his second book, *The Sleepwalker's Son*.

DAVID GRAHAM has recently published his first collection of poems, *Magic Shows*, with Cleveland State University Press. He lives in Blacksburg, Virginia.

WILLIAM GREENWAY's second book, *Where You've Been* (Breitenbush), was nominated for the Lamont Prize. A Tulane Ph.D., he now teaches at Youngstown State University.

SUSAN KAPLAN* is a teaching fellow and Ph.D. candidate in the creative writing program at the University of Houston, which awarded her a 1986 Academy of American Poets Prize. This is her first publication.

BRUCE BERGER recently had poems in *Poetry Northwest* and *Barron's*. He lives in Paradise Valley, Arizona.

GREG KUZMA's most recent book is *Of China and of Greece* (Sun Press). He teaches at the University of Nebraska, in Lincoln.

JOHN CIARDI, a frequent contributor to these pages for over forty years, died on March 30, 1986. His last books of poetry, *Selected Poems* and *Birds of Pompeii*, were published shortly before his death by the University of Arkansas Press.

JOHN FREDERICK NIMS has had recent poems in *The Atlantic*, *Grand Street*, and The *Sewanee*, *Georgia*, and *Yale* Reviews. He has a Guggenheim Fellowship for poetry for 1986–87.

*First appearance in *Poetry*.

NEWS NOTES

Henry Taylor won the Pultizer Prize for Poetry for *The Flying Change*, published by Louisiana State University Press. ♍ The poet Dudley Randall and the novelist Wright Morris received $40,000 Senior Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts. ♍ The League of Canadian Poets has given its first F. R. Scott Translation Awards to Roger Greenwald for *The Silence Afterwards: The Selected Poems of Rolf Jacobsen* (Princeton University Press) and Robin Skelton for *George Faludy: Selected Poems 1933–1980* (McClelland & Stewart). The award includes a cash price of $1,000. ♍ Andrew Hudgins won The Society of Midland Authors Award for Poetry for his volume *Saints & Strangers* (Houghton Mifflin). ♍ Douglas Dunn won the £1,000 Whitbread Poetry Award for his collection *Elegies* (Faber and Faber), which was later named Whitbread Book of the Year for 1985. The four other Whitbread Category Nominations for Book of the Year were for a novel: *Hawksmoor*, by Peter Ackroyd; a biography: *Hugh Dalton*, by Ben Pimlett; a children's novel: *The Nature of the Beast*, by Janni Howken; and a first novel: *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, by Jeanette Winterson. The Book of the Year, England's most valuable prize, carries a £17,500 cash award. *Elegies* is the first Whitbread Book of the Year, although the Whitbread literary awards have been presented for the past fourteen years.

BOOKS RECEIVED

VERSE

The Bus Home, by Shirley Bowers Anders. University of Missouri Press. $5.95.
After the Grasshopper, by Marvin Banta. Grasshopper Publications (Hennessey, OK). $10.00.
Civil Blood, by Jill Breckenridge. Milkweed Editions (Minneapolis). $19.50 cloth; $9.50 paper.
Ofício do fogo, by Renato Carmargo. Livraria Taurus Editora (Rio de Janeiro). No price listed.
Living as a Lesbian, by Cheryl Clarke. Firebrand Books (Ithaca, NY). $6.95.
The Marble Queen, by Henri Cole. Atheneum. $15.00 cloth; $8.95 paper.
Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis, by Wendy Cope. Faber and Faber. $18.95 cloth; $9.95 paper.
Memory Gardens, by Robert Creeley. New Directions. $15.95 cloth; $7.95 paper.
I Know Why Parents Eat Their Children, by Michael Cummings. American Studies Press (Tampa). $5.00.
The Whole Truth: A Poem, by James Cummins. North Point Press. $11.95.
The Man with Red Suspenders, by Philip Dacey. Milkweed Editions. $6.95.
Vesper Sparrows, by Deborah Digges. Atheneum. $15.00 cloth; $8.95 paper.
Thomas and Beulah, by Rita Dove. Carnegie-Mellon University Press. $14.95 cloth; $6.95 paper.
The Springhouse: Poems, by Norman Dubie. W. W. Norton. $14.95 cloth; $6.95 paper.
For You on New Year's Day, by Gevorg Emin. Tr. by Diana Der Hovanessian. Ohio University Press. $17.95 cloth; $10.95 paper.
Not Set in Stone, by Grace Freeman. John's Press (Rock Hill, SC). $12.95 cloth; $6.95 paper.
Memories of the Future: The Daybooks of Tina Modotti, by Margaret Gibson, Louisiana State University Press. $13.95 cloth; $6.95 paper.
Mid-Ohio Elegies, by Gordon Grigsby. Logan Elm Press. Distrib. by Ohio State University Press. $40.00.
The Bright Nails Scattered on the Ground: Love Poems, by Allen Grossman. New Directions. $8.95.
The Drive-In, by R. S. Gwynn. University of Missouri Press. $5.95.
Dominion, by Brooks Haxton. Alfred A. Knopf. $8.95.
Blue Stone & Other Poems, by Neva Harrington. Still Point Press (Dallas). $14.95.
In Evidence: Poems of the Liberation of Nazi Concentration Camps, by Barbara Helfgott Hyett. University of Pittsburgh Press. $15.95 cloth; $8.95 paper.
A Water Cycle, by Eleanor Keats. Dawn Valley Press (New Wilmington, PA). $6.95.
The Hundredth Monkey, by Ken Keyes, Jr. Vision Books (Coos Bay, OR). $2.00.
Pavans, by Ian Krieger. Ommation Press (Chicago). $6.00.
A Celebration for Stanley Kunitz. Sheep Meadow Press. $10.00.
Amy, by Randy Jay Landon. Signpost Press (Bellingham, WA). $12.00 cloth; $4.50 paper.
No Mean Feet, by Liz LeBlanc. Ommation Press. No price listed.
Fugue, by Ivan Malinowski. Curbstone Press (Williamantic, CT). $9.00.
I'm Not Thousandfurs, by Sarah Menefee. Curbstone Press. $6.00.
The New Oxford Book of Australian Verse, ed. by Les A. Murray. Oxford University Press. $34.00.
Dream Work, by Mary Oliver. Atlantic Monthly Press. $14.95.
Zombie Notes, by Maureen Owen. Sun (New York City). $7.00.

Mexican Poetry: An Anthology. Compiled by Octavio Paz. Tr. by Samuel Beckett. Grove Press. $22.95 cloth; $9.95 paper.

The Adventure, by Frederick Pollack. Story Line Press (Santa Cruz, CA). $15.00 cloth; $8.00 paper.

Invasions & Other Poems, by Antonio Porta. Tr. by Paul Vangelisti. Bi-lingual text. Invisible City (San Francisco). $10.00

When the Owl Cries, Indians Die: Poems of Mexico and the Southwest, by J. W. Rivers. Bilingual text. Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. $14.95.

Little O's and Other Poems, by Garret Rosenblatt. North Gull Publishing (Cambridge, MA). $4.95.

Living and Sinning for Them, by Paul Shuttleworth. Signpost Press. $2.00.

Two Sparrows, by Felix Stefanile. Sparrow Press (West Lafayette, IN). $2.50.

Measure, by Thomas Swiss. University of Alabama Press. $11.75 cloth; $5.95 paper.

Oxidized Virgin, by Gorden Walmsley. Adler Publishing Company (Rochester, NY). $9.95.

Houses Roses, by James L. Weil. Sparrow Press. No price listed.

Lovely Day for a Wedding, by John Whitworth. Secker & Warburg. Distrib. by David & Charles. $8.95.

PROSE

Bad Government and Silly Literature, by Carol Bly. Milkweed Editions. $6.95.

Borges, the Poet, ed. by Carlos Cortinez. University of Arkansas Press. No price listed.

Shakespeare's Poetics, by Ekbert Faas. Cambridge University Press. $34.50.

Get Published: Editors from the Nation's Top Magazines Tell You What They Want, by Diane Gage and Marcia Hibsch Coppess. Holt, Rinehart and Winston. $24.95.

Poetry in a Divided World, by Henry Gifford. Cambridge University Press. $22.95.

Apocalyptic Messianism, and Contemporary Jewish-American Poetry, by R. Barbara Gitenstein. State University of New York Press. $29.50 cloth; $9.95 paper.

Regaining Paradise: Milton and the Eighteenth Century, by Dustin Griffin. Cambridge University Press. $29.95.

Musical Settings of American Poetry: A Bibliography, ed. by Michael Hovland. Greenwood Press (New York City). $55.00.

Marina Tsvetaeva: The Woman, Her World and Her Poetry, by Simon Karlinsky. Cambridge University Press. $44.50 cloth; $15.95 paper.

The Poetry of Vachel Lindsay, Complete & With Lindsay's Drawings, Volume 3: Notes/Appendix/Title Index. Ed. by Dennis Camp. Spoon River Poetry Press (Peoria). $14.95.

Ghost Dance, by Carol Maso. North Point Press. $16.95.

A Ringing Glass: The Life of Rainer Maria Rilke, by Donald Prater. Oxford University Press. $27.50.

Visions and Revisions of American Poetry, by Lewis Putnam Turco. University of Arkansas Press. No price listed.

I Wanted to Write a Poet: The Autobiography of the Works of a Poet, by William Carlos Williams. Ed. by Edith Heal. New Directions. No price listed.

New from Princeton

Six Dynasties Poetry

Kang-i Sun Chang

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POETRY

SEPTEMBER 1986

JAY PARINI

THE MARINER

For Richard Kenney

This wide-plank table of a skiff
is rigged for travel,
with a sunny window at my back.
I sit alone here, spinning
an old globe beside my chair, its skin
of colors, planet of my own.
I list the places I would go:
the outer regions of my hands,
the tiny nerve-ends twitching in the night,
the peninsular foot, the nether bowels,
the mucous caverns of my inner ear.
I set my sails each morning after breakfast,
pulling sheets from a lefthand drawer,
taking a pen between my teeth.
The spirits seem to blow
four ways at once or, mostly, not at all.
Even Agamemnon had to slay a daughter
for those winds that carried him to Troy.
I, too, have slaughtered my kin
for motion, for a poem to waste.
Now I spread my charts,

correct my compass, and lay down a course
through the next few hours.
May the gods who brood upon these open waters
ease my way, direct the passage
of this fragile craft,
this sloop of self I angle into day.

TOWN LIFE

For Ann Beattie

It strikes me as the best of every world
this morning as I leave the house at nine
and walk uptown, past shuttered houses
I have learned by heart down to the angle
of each sloping roof, the kinds of siding
and their various degrees of disrepair.
I've memorized the shubbery and lawns,
all so reflective of their owners' minds,
the blend of trees, some planted by the town
in 1920, others here by chance,
the drift of wind, or someone's purpose.
Today September-blooming mountain laurels
burn with flowers to fill the gaps where long-
necked elms once made a tunnel of their leaves.
I know this sidewalk as a blind man knows
his way around his rooms: the tilting flagstones
and the gravel drives, macadam stretches
that will heave with frost by mid-December.
All my joints adjust to ups and downs
as I proceed, half drunk on air, on night-
rinsed grasses and the gilt-edged leaves
that riffle in the slightest wind with that
low rustling tinny note of early fall,
the note of loss that makes me savor
what befalls each step: the wedge of geese
that arrows overhead between slate roofs,

the exoskeletons of huge black ants
that file like soldiers through the Kiber Pass
to certain failure in the winter's grip,
the squirrels rippling in grey blurs up trees
with preservations in their iron jaws.
There's so much going on I'll never know
but happily assume has its own pattern;
I have mine, which fits into the town's
slow ritual so well no doubt you'll wonder
if some parts of me were not lopped off
to make this fitting. Wouldn't I prefer
to wake at dawn in country heaven, with acres
of raw land around my house, with crops to tend,
with cows dewlapping through the shallow swales?
Some friends saw wood to save their souls
while I burn oil; they hike into the hills
for rustic solace as I walk these streets.
I've other friends who live in cities and believe
in motion multiplied by time, the swirl
of faces, calendars with no blank spaces left.
Their lives are vertical, like glass and steel,
and full of light at any time of day.
I don't begrudge them what they've found to work.
I'm all for anything that makes you feel
the gravity afoot, the tug of light
particulars, the sway of chosen hours,
though I love town life for its Lazy Susan
of well-timed events, the tower that chimes,
the surge of traffic at appointed moments,
life in slow concentric circles that acknowledge
morning, noon, and night, imperious seasons
that enforce their rules, make us accede
to larger motions than we make ourselves.
I love the neighborliness of little towns,
the expectations that are so well met:
the waitress at the diner where I drink
my de-caf coffee, one old cop who never
says hello, too charged with duty to descend
to pleasantries on county time, the dozen

keepers of the dozen shops who fill my life
with necessary objects, foods, and service.
Their worlds depend upon my morning walk,
my needs and whims. And so we live in
symbiotic swirl around the center
of the village green: its white gazebo
like a hub of sorts, the centrifugal
aim of all our motion, though it's really
useless as a building goes, except for
concerts by the local bands on summer nights.
That white gazebo is the town's real heart:
a minor symbol of nostalgic longing
for our fictive past amid the hubbub
of our daily work in buildings shaped
to useful ends: the Greco-Roman banks
with much more cash than any of us needs
to make one life, the small post office
that can ship our mail to Bognor Regis
or Addis Abbaba without any hitch.
It seems that we can eat our cake and have it,
though all wisdom votes against that fact.
I use the royal "we" perhaps too glibly,
since I'll never stand for public office
or consent to join the Rotary or Masons.
(My love of town life doesn't go that far.)
But—on my oath—I'll fill these streets
with all the shambling presence I can muster
for enough good years to say I've been here
and have met them well on equal terms.
I'll be one spoke in this bright wheel
that spins through decades at its chosen speed,
that passing airplanes notice like a dime
in heavy grass—a glint of silver—
something they would probably pick up
if only it were not so far away.

WILLIAM TROWBRIDGE

WALKING BACK

I have no business here, a bearded stranger
circling the block, beginning to draw looks
from the man pruning his forsythia, the housewife
who calls the children in from jumprope. Dutch elm
disease has thinned the landscape, let afternoon
sunlight glare off grass and sidewalks. Everything
looks too new. Our house is green now, with patio
and lawn where tufts of rye grass used to stall
our mower till my father called it quits and took
to working weekends at the office. Even
our frontyard maple's forgotten my mark beneath
thirty-five new rings. Up the street,
Skrija's grocery store has lost its musty heart
of oak and penny candy. A neon sign
announces "Guns and Ammo" above barred
windows and a yellow metal door. Still,
there's the bump at Sixtieth and Grove—ready as ever
for the next no-hander showing off for his idea
of the girl who'd like his looks—and the blue jays
and the locusts and the tack of ripe asphalt.

Like those who stare, I wonder what I want,
whether I'm dangerous or simply need directions.
Today, hundreds, maybe thousands of us search
the old neighborhoods for clues: initials in a sidewalk,
a rusty nail pounded in a tree, a wish still floating
near the school, where a small ghost, waiting on the last
bell, rubs the shiny nickle in his pocket.

LESLIE ULLMAN

MY MOTHER IS NOT WATCHING

from the door as I start my first
walk to school. I am not afraid

though this crisp eyelet
dress feels like someone else's skin

and these houses
tall faces turning

away. This morning
my mother gets to stay

where she chooses, raising
one shoulder, cradling the phone

so her hands are free to coat each
nail to a shield over each

pale finger. Smoke from her cigarette
curls across the table like the breath

of a visitor, the glamourous
woman she secretly loves.

In this dress I'm her dream
and no one's daughter.

School is a story whose ending
she tells me she doesn't know.

Now she opens the paper to follow
a war far away, while I march

into autumn, beneath the fences
and high windows which in time

I won't see, just
the blackboard worn thin

with words that vanish
each night. I will find my way

through their sounds, a song
unwinding, and one day

I will open a book
and not notice I'm reading.

CAROLYN KIZER

PEARL

Every Thursday Pearl arrived in her old Model-A
with a satchel of lotions cremes and balms
to make over Mother.
Fresh from her bath, Mother lay on her ample belly
as Pearl pummelled, rubbed, massaged
the firm fleshy back of Mother
till it turned from sweaty peach to glistening crimson.

Then they move from her bed to the still-steamy bathroom, where
Mother bends over the basin as Pearl soaps her head;
and the witness-child
stares at the face of her mother, upside-down
between brown curtains of hair.
Pearl, busy as any nurse or minister,
moves briskly from sink to chair,
applies the harsh-colored henna the child abhors.

Pearl seems to ignore the child's disapproving frown;
the child can't catch her eye,
though Mother's, luminous and green, are transfixed with pity
as she attends to Pearl's inconsequent chatter;
beneath it, Mother and child
hear the drone of the terrible dirge that is never over,
the song of a fatally wounded Columbine
with her crazed painted smile:

Pearl, frantic with a croupy daughter,
frightened of losing days
of work with Madame Patenaud, her termagent employer,
had forced her own little girl to swallow her medicine.

But what was hastily thrust between the child's burning lips
was Lysol. The little girl abandoned her.
Pearl is alone forever.

Now this child imagines Pearl as hollow,
a decorated funerary urn
set on an altar not to God but Beauty.
Pearl paints Mother's toenails propped on the sink.
Why hadn't she died?
But perhaps she had—and it's a ghost of her
who pearls these fingers, toes; then later paces
the nightmares of the child. Desolation and desertion!
Pearl's ivory face averted as the child begs mercy
from the bleak desert of dream.

But now, swathed like a houri in a heavy towel,
Mother leans back in her chair
while Pearl stirs magic in a jar: brown sticky unguent.
Pearl's mentor, Madame Patenaud, in long-ago Los Angeles
was a genius with cremes and lotions; even today
Pearl's voice hushes with awe
as she applies the secret formula reeking of tar
(the child's nose never forgets), a potion which,
faithfully used, confers eternal youth.

She would be Ponce de Leon to Pearl's elixir,
eternally youthful Mama, fat and beautiful,
transfixed
as Time is cheated; Pearl swabs her face, dabs it with ice.
They study her reflection, Pearl nods
with satisfaction; only a tiny frown
as Pearl tweezes a single hair from Mother's arching brows:
a Japanese master gardener
who plucks one needle from a famous pine.

The child senses the bond between these two,
the tragic and the laughing Muse—she, bare-faced now,
an empty canvas on which Pearl plies her skills
except that it is a speaking canvas, critical
of its creator, who reinvents her look
as the child is shut out.

She who grimaces hideously in the mirror,
puffing her cheeks or putting out her tongue,
is stuck, she fears forever, with this pudding oval
which no hand molds.
Oh, she will cartoon herself with bloody lipstick
stolen from Mama,
but scorns her own lack of skill—presses Mother and Pearl
to be let in.

As we grow older, Mother, you close the distances
between us, with kisses, dresses, tiny conspiracies.
We cuddle beneath one comforter, serene and mild.
But Pearl, O Pearl, I would have been your heart's fulfillment.
I was your prodigy, your dream of life.
I was your murdered child.

SUSAN WOOD

LATE-BLOOMERS

For Caitlin

It doesn't know it's time
for everything to die, this Rose of Sharon.
Late afternoon September, pink and blooming, it hugs
the sun side of the house. Whatever it is—
a weed, a tree, what the almanac calls a shrub—
it's like a woman in love, boney and too tall,
a little horse-faced even, who's accustomed to knowing
she isn't beautiful. She's surprised by this
sudden flowering, the last one before the frost.
I know what it is to be
a wallflower, a weed, the one girl nobody

danced with Friday nights. At twelve
my friend had breasts and a bad case
of cramps. On the sixth grade trip to Fair Park Zoo
Roy Presley kissed her in the darkened bus
so long I shut my eyes and prayed
I'd be changed like that.
This morning, in the library's cool vault, I held
in my hands another prayer, the book
Anne of Cleves gave Henry when, impatient

for his bride, he waylaid her
on the road to London, surprising her, he said,
"to nourish love," as if to test the truth
of Holbein's portrait—a gaze at once so frank

and so demure it seemed to promise mysteries
even a king had never guessed. On the flyleaf,
in tiny, birdlike scrawl, she'd written,
I beseech your most humble grace,

whenever you look on this, remember me,
but what he remembered always was only his anger,
disappointment that she was not beautiful

as the artist saw her, the golden sun surpassing
Christine of Denmark's silver moon, but a woman
no longer young, "a Flanders mare."
When he gave her 4000 pounds and freedom
not to please, she began to grow into the painting.
Holbein hadn't dreamed her
after all, had only seen something sleeping
in those hooded eyes. Oh, I know some things
don't change. At our twentieth class reunion

the same girl is still the one they judge
Most Beautiful, the one to whom the football boys,
those who came back from Vietnam, incline
their balding heads and paunching bellies. "Beauty is
in the eye of the beholder," my mother said,
but I begin to believe it's in the one
beheld, the way love, however late, shows us
our truest selves, the way the blossom sleeps
inside the bud. This poem, then, is for her
who doesn't think she's beautiful enough, for Anne,
for me, this weedy shrub, for all late-bloomers.

EGGS

For Steve Dunn

Morning broke like an egg
on the kitchen floor and I hated
them, too, eggs, how easily they broke
and ran, yellow insides spilling out, oozing

and staining, the flawed
beneath what's beautiful. And I hated
my father, the one cock
in the henhouse, who laid the plate

on the table and made me
eat, who told me not to get up
until I was done, every bite. And I hated
how I gagged and cried, day

after day, until there was no time
left and he'd give in and I'd go off
to school like that, again, hungry.
But why did I hate eggs

so much? Freud, old banty rooster, who knew
a thing or two about such things, might say
I hated myself, hated the egg
growing in secret deep inside my body,

the secret about to be spilled
to the world, and maybe I did.
Or maybe it's the way the egg
repeats itself again and again, a perfect

oval every time, the way I found myself,
furious, standing by my own child's bed
holding a belt, and hit, and saw her face
dissolve in a yolk. But that doesn't say

enough about why we hoard
our hurts like golden eggs and foolishly
wait for them to hatch, why
we faced each other across the table,

my father and I, and fought
our battles over eggs and never fought
with them, never once picked up
those perfect ovals and sent them singing

back and forth across the room, the spell
broken like shells, until we were
covered with them, our faces golden
and laughing, both of us beautiful and flawed.

DISTANCES

Now time has made us,
if not friends, at least not enemies,
I wake in our old house while you're away
and go downstairs for coffee and the *Post*,
the children I've come to stay with still asleep.
In the early light the room assumes
its familiar shape, and I open every window
and door closed against last night's storm
to the rain-soaked, steamy world. Each piece
of furniture stays where it was, even this sofa
I slept on nights before I left.
Afterwards, I dreamed for years
of coming back. Nothing had changed, though
in the dream's blue film our room seemed
to have lost its sharp edges. You beside me
under the green spread I never liked, everything floating
like objects seen underwater. This isn't what I wanted,
I'd think and try to struggle up from sleep's
black undertow until I'd be flooded
by relief. Alone in another city, I wandered

through rooms of a furnished sublet, dazed
with gratitude and disbelief, touching things
as though the unfamiliar shapes could give to me
myself: two yellow ducks, lamps lit
from within, waddled across the floor
and a wooden circus train never stopped
travelling, each tiny animal safe and perfect
in its separate cage. The walls smelled like trees.
Sometimes I remembered another dream, the old dream
of falling: at six, told how Freddie Harbour's brother
slipped from the library's third-floor rail, I slipped too,
night after night, the marble floor reaching up for me.
In that dream I never hit bottom, never tested
the warning that to dream of the end
of falling is to die in your sleep. I don't believe
it's true. I'm here and still alive.

•

We used to say this house
had ghosts. Signs so common they might be a story
by someone without imagination: footsteps
on the stairs, a door creaking and closing
by itself, a visitor we sometimes sensed in sleep.
But if ghosts are the imagined shadows
of ourselves, then maybe I was the ghost, disembodied
and beside myself, drifting through days
like drifting through walls. Even now, I'd say
our spirits hover here, linger
over things we carried house to house and city
to city—a hand-carved chair, the Picasso print
we loved, a box of photographs, though
there is no photograph now of your face
as a shut gate, your body as a wall
I couldn't climb. Maybe our lives,
as they always have, accumulate in small things.
The angle, for instance, with which the sun flares
this morning through the east windows, each mote

moving and separate in the light.
Months after our last move we found
our album of wedding pictures had vanished
as though it never was, and I imagine it
taken up by a drunk in an abandoned warehouse.
He nurses his bottle and carefully turns
the pages. How happy they look, he thinks, sentimental
as a drunk can be. How beautiful everyone is!
The bridesmaids smiling above their pink dresses,
the groomsmen who laugh and hold themselves
toward the camera with a deliberate grace
he recognizes. Can he tell, in that picture, you're blushing
because with each handshake they press condoms
into your palm like money? Perhaps he does
or doesn't notice that I have the stunned,
unfocussed look I wore so often then, or that,
in this picture, I'm putting your ring on the wrong hand.

•

Once a friend told me
how a man she loved lived on for years
in the house his wife and children left and how
on her bedroom wall one of his daughters
had drawn with black crayon the outline of a heart
and inside a kind of epitaph:
"A whole family once lived here," with all their names
and the date. When she saw it, she said,
she knew what it meant to have a past
you could never forgive. There's nothing like that
here, only the old records I left behind. I wipe away
the dust and put the Stones on the stereo.
"You can't always get what you want,"
they wail. Mick puckers his lips
and struts. We didn't believe them then,
those old songs of frustration, and it still
sounds like a joke, the way he teases
the words, though the joke's, I guess, on us.

That summer Brian Jones drowned at Cotchford Farm
was the hottest I remember, though I've forgotten
plenty. I was pregnant and numb, weighted down
by a life that wasn't mine. All summer I read
Winnie-the-Pooh, a kind of mourning, in preparation.
I wanted, like him, to know it "by heart,"
as we say. We mean, by that, to commit it
to memory, as if desire alone could tell us
what we always knew. The honey was never
where he thought he'd hidden it, and I hoped the willows
spread their arms over him just as his gold hair
spread around him floating face-down
in Milne's pool. The drowned boy who never dies,
another image in a children's book. You believed
will was enough, that nothing bad
would happen, that our life together would last
if I chose it. I think our choices become us, the way,
outside the house I live in now, the Rose of Sharon,
a weed disguised as a tree, digs in its roots
and blossoms, rising all the way to the second story.
Some day, years from now, one of us
will hear of the death of the other.

PHILIP DACEY

UPON SENDING HIS CHILD SUPPORT CHECK TO L. L. BEAN AND HIS CHECK FOR THE SLEEPING BAGS TO HIS EX-WIFE

Dear God of misaddressed envelopes,
let her not consider this order
an invitation to zip ourselves
together in the deep woods,

nor let the Maine outfitter
spend hours searching his storeroom
for runaway children so distraught
from divorce their only comfort

is L. L. Bean clothes, but let instead
my children learn to sleep
in bags even if they should happen
to be misaddressed and sent

flying through the air
at incredible speeds like cancelled
checks a computer spits out,
like planets on their own,

and let them dream in those swift bags
of support, of their mother
as strong as the rooted trees
campers can count on,

of their father happy to be
at desks, on streetcorners, or anywhere
passing out all the wrong checks
to all the right people,

and of a bean somewhere
beginning to comprehend
its power, how one thing
leads to another and before you know it

an entire world
is clothed
in itself
and giving that self away.

MARY KARR

SOFT MASK

On the ultrasound screen my child curled
in his own fluid orbit, less real
than any high-school-textbook tadpole
used to symbolize birth, till the nurse
placed a white arrow on his heart flicker:
a quick needle of light. Tonight his face

blooms in my window before trees
stripped bare, a moon hung full and red.
That soft mask, not yet hardened in autumn wind,
would hold a thumbprint if I touched him. I hesitate
to touch him. He's not yet felt the burden
of a hand, nor tasted air, nor toddled
toward some bladelike gaze. He is all sweetness,
mouth smudged against the clear silk
that envelops him, webbed hands that reach
and retreat as a cat tests water.

Or like Narcissus, or the great wondering
madonnas, or any beast lost in another, the demon
who kneels to feed at some lily throat.
His pulse first matching then at odds with mine,
that small arrow seeming to tremble
as if striking something true.

JEANNE MURRAY WALKER

SEIZURE

I gave you what I could when you were born,
salt water to rock you,
your half of nine month's meat,
miles of finished veins,
and all the blood I had to spare.

And then I said, this is the last time
I divide myself in half, the last time
I lie down in danger and rise bereft,
the last time I give up half my blood.

Fifteen months later, when I walked into your room
your mobile of the sun, moon,
and stars was tilting
while your lips twisted,
while you arched your back.

Your fingers groped for something in the air.
Your arms and legs flailed like broken wings.
Your breath was a load too heavy
for your throat to heave into your lungs.
You beat yourself into a daze against your crib.

We slapped your feet,
we flared the lights,
we doused you in a tub of lukewarm water.
But your black eyes rolled.
You had gone somewhere
and left behind a shape of bluish skin,
a counterfeit of you.
It was then,
before the red wail of the police car,
before the IV's, before the medicine

dripped into you like angels, before you woke
to a clear brow, to your own funny rising voice,

it was then I would have struck the bargain,
all my blood
for your small shaking.
I would have called us even.

INSPECTING THE GARDEN AFTER DARK

A few things I know: I know that you're my son.
This back yard is your home, and you are
crawling on fat knees over this mound
of black dirt, dragging your diaper the way the night
is dragging a wet moon into the sky.
You can say *mama* and *daddy*. But you whisper
mama to onions and *daddy* to the asters.
I've already lost you. Or maybe never had you,
safe in your crib with blankets by the night light.
The asters know your kiss. It's wet as a slug's.
What do you have to do with these morning glories,
unpacking leaves, hundreds of them escaping
with umbrellas, holding their homes in their own hearts?
See how the cabbage patiently folds one day
after another over his secret name?
If I could, I'd peel your days away like leaves
and finally find the name that's yours.
I think back, December, May, leaf by leaf
to last year at this time, when your heart
was a wish in God's mouth beating to get out.

LEN ROBERTS

THE MOMENT

If the Spectator . . . could make a Friend & Companion of one of these images of wonder . . . then would he arise from his grave, then would he meet the Lord in the Air & then would he be happy.
William Blake

Walking the three tiers in first light, out
here so my two-year-old son won't wake the house,
I watch him pull and strip ragweed, chickory, yarrow,
so many other weeds and small flowers
I don't know the names for, saying Big and Mine,
and Joshua—words, words, words. Then
it is the moment, that split-second
when he takes my hand, gives it a tug,
and I feel his entire body-weight, his whole
heart-weight, pulling me toward
the gleaming flowers and weeds he loves.
That moment which is eternal and is gone in a second,
when he yanks me out of myself like some sleeper
from his dead-dream sleep into the blues and whites
and yellows I must bend down to see clearly, into the faultless
flesh of his soft hands, into his new brown eyes,
the miracle of him, and of the earth itself,
where he lives among the glitterings, and takes me.

NIGHTS ON OLMSTEAD STREET

My father sits in the dark, rocking
his way back to Guadalcanal, to Guam,
cutting his way through canebrake, sipping
rust-water from his rifle's bolt, long-
soaking in the green bathtub brimmed
with ice to break the malarial
fever. Soon he will rise to bury again
his dead brother in water, so
they won't tear his gold teeth out, but
for now he holds my head against
his chest, the fine hands stretched
across the side of my face, the fingers
gently kneading my cheekbones, my nose,
the valley between my lips and jaw. He
is leaning down to make sure I am still
breathing, saying my name lightly to see
if I sleep. But I do not answer,
just lie there quietly in his bony arms,
knowing even then how hard it is
for him to set me into the warm bed,
walk silently out of the dark.

KATHERINE SONIAT

DAUGHTER

A herd of cow eyes stare out
from the dark green of a locust grove,
and I recall you saying how at first
that man tried to make fuzzy sense of her
as a deer—some warm dumb animal
who lifted from the highway,
riding his van's fender toward death.
The possibility of the antlers
being a bike's handlebars was as remote
as his whole beery midnight world.

You've gone back and back to that
pebbled side of the road,
looking for what you cannot say.
Some reason why it was a daughter
and not a deer veering heavily
onto his fender, being torn
through the night. Just deer until
her arm or hair flashed wildly
and his headlights torched her death,
torched his drunk mind with the *she* of it.

Now you are left with an occasional
deer to gape at for a lifetime
the instant it flees or freezes
in your headlights. The questions
glow and spin: beer, deer,
beer. The shadows of you are around me
as through the locust trees
cow eyes bloom
like all the cold, dark matter
that peers then disappears in space.

BARRI ARMITAGE

FALL RITUAL

Even the marigolds on my windowsill
speed on to seed, showing it's time
to shorten the path to earth.
You always stay at twenty-two,
you, the expert at shortcuts:
three cakes in one bowl,

four quilt squares, or eight, at a time.
Your bike, faster than cars at rush hour,
seemed almost welded to you,
sped you along the night's straight edge,
armlight blinking gold,
until a Chevy cut you

short. Outside, I soften a groove in the clay.
Maroon and gold petals, dry as confetti,
slip away at the slightest touch.
I wriggle the seeds apart
and push them into a common bed.
Reluctant to cover up,

I savor the feel of earth,
then sprinkle it, pack it like snow.
Bone of my bone, you were packed in me,
grew from meat I chewed, from milk I drank—
seed buried in seed
you carried to the ground.

When snow's patches have melted,
and the flurry of birds returns
like the rush of rain,
I will kneel at this earth's pocket
as flesh of the springtime's flesh
begins to crown.

WEIGHTS

Like children split by divorce,
all items are stacked to the right or left.
The price of gravity forces the choice—
cotton balls move north with your job,
leftover Crisco stays with friends.
Movers with magic markers wrap the past
in brown paper. Grief I sorted
two years ago with our daughter's clothes
piles up with the boxes from her room.

We lie on the quilt left for the night.
Next to my head, in light from the bare window,
the holes of the phone-jack stare.
At the border of my dream, an alien slips north,
blood pounding. Land creaks and shifts
as a blindfolded woman balances scales.
A man at a desk rises, squeezes
a coffin back through the fence.

The streetlight goes off as sun begins.
We touch, heavy as lodestone.
Miles north, the rumble of a van
pulls out from a load-check, beams ahead,
tuned to a station picking up
love-cries that stretch like rays.

JUDITH SKILLMAN

WRITTEN ON LEARNING OF ARRHYTHMIA IN THE UNBORN CHILD

I would liken woodsmoke to death
except for the birds which pass through
and emerge intact, and the sky which stands
quietly behind it, white with the chance of snow.

The horse made out of yesterday's snow
loosens its stone eyes and sculpted mane.
In time it will lose everything
except the brave forelegs, those it never had.

I could go on watching these things
until nightfall, which comes each evening
earlier now. I would sit in the inner dark
of a suburban house which burns with life,
my other children lit up from within
by ivory bones and papier-mâché complexions.
Their blood flows easy as candle wax
melted from crayon.

I could stay here in the warm pocket
that precedes shock, unlike those women
who don't feel their own faces
anymore. They walk from room to room
in the four perfect chambers
of their own hearts,

staring blankly into the future
as if it were written in chimney smoke,
carrying the past in their striated laps.
Listen as they mouth the name of the child
that was meant to be, while around them
silence widens, and the depths.

THE WORSHIP OF THE VISIBLE SPECTRUM

This is the light
which, like a sudden stroke of fortune,
finds itself lodged in a particular flower.
Take the primrose, hardy
as a crystal. Then we love the saturation point
of petals, and celebrate the specific,
like the child with his primary colors,
each one thick enough to stay put.

Or this light is merely the lightness of birds,
an adjective. Cheerful, but holding no opinion
on the matter of flight. Unconcerned.
As by some miracle the red-headed parrot finch
invests its feathers in every range
of the visible spectra. This makes it rare,
forbidden for export.
A probable victim of poachers and extinction.

There are other birds, so brilliantly hued
they are labelled 'problem birds.'
Nervous and shy, they crave
privacy and drop dead in captivity for no apparent reason.
There is no way to guarantee
that they will breed.
To them the light is everywhere,
a frivolous interruption, a lack of dark.

Yesterday the sun fell into my son's bowl
like a bird he chose to save.
To him windows are yet prisms,
leaving approximate rainbows on the walls.
Night requires a twenty-five watt bulb,
and the chicken he lost to the dogs
still carries its soul, a few yellow feathers
wrapped in a baggy.

Anything is possible.
Wind could be light, except that leaves
don't carry in a vacuum.
I still have much to explain to them—
infra-red, ultra-violet, the force fields
around the blind. My children draw x-rays
of their hands on white paper as we pass the equinox,
and the visual purple of crocus begins.

MARIA FLOOK

CHILD BURIAL

I was ashamed to think of anything
while the others remained blank with formality
and sorrow, but the casket looked small
as a lunch pail left behind at a picnic ground.
A breeze lifted my hair, a swirling
I enjoyed when riding carousel horses.
Our circle was immovable and closed,
a severe crescent stiff as snowfence.
To show respect, I chose the frozen posture
I learned at school when lining up
for vaccinations. I shivered as the family
stared, measuring my size and seeking features,
for somehow I resembled what was lost
and my presence suggested a queer rivalry.
It was difficult to keep still
as the day walked on, the shellacked box mirrored
swooping birds, the whole world spinning on it.
It must have been the hour when I daydreamed
in class because I could not follow
the relentless algebra of stones, dull rows
like chalkboards repeating a hard lesson.
I preferred the hot house lilies
which smelled like Karo and candle-drippings.
Then I tracked a distant cloud, a grey funnel
of rain which dangled like a stocking miles away,
but I did not look again at death or see
what it saw about me.
The priest closed his book upon a snowy tassel,
white as the glare of that moody winter, white
as the silk bunting I'd seen at the mortuary.
It was not the same color as those ponies,
polished for summer and tethered
nose to tail like all the days ahead.

COMMENT

THE CATASTROPHE OF CREATIVE WRITING

The Catastrophe of Rainbows, by Martha Collins. Cleveland State University Poetry Center. $6.00

The old sweet antagonism between the academic and the creative writer has disappeared. How much it was really there or how deep it went is not so much an issue as the fact that it is gone. Fictitious or not, more myth perhaps than reality, less interesting in practice than in theory, nevertheless it provided a helpful, almost an essential, tension within English Departments. For both the teacher of literature and the creative writer, the antagonism was stimulating. For the poet, there was the daily reminder that he or she had some persuading to do, that he or she was not Yeats, or Dickinson, and that one's colleagues preferred Yeats, Dickinson, and of course Shakespeare over whatever the creative writer was likely to be doing. Rather than discourage the poet, this conflict was actually a challenge. Having been taken into the department in recognition of the occasional though small need for someone who actually practices the art, the poet had already been forgiven whatever deficiency in training he may have been the victim of. He did not have a Ph.D. But he or she was a writer, and probably a published writer. While her colleagues proposed new looks at old works, all the time in full light of the tradition and the research, and made the tiny though appreciable progress that goes with such work, the poet made wild irresponsible leaps, without sufficient documentation, and usually ended up not knowing where she was or whom she was copying. But the literature people knew. Or thought they did. Those employed to teach language and to praise the joys of literature for its own sake, could always remind the poet of the large forces that shape our destinies and the great writers who came before. Even where emotions strained and approached exasperation—and the academic all too readily might doubt or distrust the poet's carelessness, the poet's ignorance—the poet was the direct and immediate beneficiary in that she was being made to work in the face of a set of standards and expectations that would encourage her best efforts. From the other side, from the academic's side, having the poet around was good too because it served as a reminder that artists like Dickinson and Yeats and Whitman were real people, whatever else they were, and prone to the same sorts of unpleasant habits as the one in Room 203, the one on the payroll. Sometimes too the literature teacher might even try his hand at a little creative writing, and then the poet was close by to offer painful temperance or decent encouragement. So the poet learned that she was not Shakespeare, and the literature teacher learned that teaching Shakespeare and being Shakespeare were different things.

This is gone. In its place we have, nearly everywhere in this country, the joining together of the academic and the creative. Twenty years ago there were perhaps a dozen writing programs in America, each a discrete and usually somewhat junior entity within its English department graduate program. Now the number is two hundred and growing. The problem is that students no longer will come to the university for Ph.D.s in literature. There are no jobs, or the jobs don't pay enough to warrant the expense of acquiring the degree, or there is the illusion that whatever new jobs will be developed will be in the area of writing and creative writing, that college students just don't find Browning or Donne or Shelley relevant anymore. The student who twenty years ago would seek a standard degree and expect to teach literature in college now announces himself as a poet or fiction writer who will graduate with a Ph.D. in creative writing and teach high school creative writers.

In the meantime, the poet we visited in paragraph one at Nostalgia University, instead of being the freak of her department, now heads up a "program" in creative writing. She may be, by seniority, a full professor, but around her are clustered numerous junior staffers, assistant professors recently hired, first novelists, other poets, a short story writer, someone to teach technical writing, a few former graduate students hanging around doing summer school or night classes, and a few others out in the community working with "senior citizens." There are degree requirements to establish. There are committee meetings. There are Ph.D. committees for the writer to serve on. There are guest poets and fiction writers to bring in from outside to help float the illusion that *this* creative writing program is in touch with the new and the latest, New York and other points East. There are parties, teas, receptions, luncheons, rides to the airport, rides home from the airport, and readings, sometimes as many as one per week, and after them receptions and maybe a few drinks at the local pub. For the average "creative writer," one of perhaps five thousand officially registered now in the Poets & Writers directory, who finds the actual writing of poetry quite difficult and would rather not have to do it very much, all these professional activities are really quite reassuring. Doing them, being busy with them, there are necessarily other hands to hold, a sense of shared purpose, a strong identification with a group—in this case the institution of the PROGRAM, a fostering of loyalty, and, in the face of the huge and growing enrollments in creative writing courses, the ecstasy of being associated with a growth industry—having a product to sell that people actually want. It's all heady stuff.

For the unfortunate writer, who took up writing poems or stories, not as a "career choice" advised him by some guidance counselor or marketing extrapolator, but because he was compelled to do so, and can do nothing else, "creative writing" as I have described it, is a disaster. The writer no longer teaches the few who really care and are dedicated to the art, the few and the best; he teaches the average and the many. The writer no longer works in the fierce light of the scrutiny of the ages—and the scrutiny of the scholars—the quality of one's writing is not any longer a concern. The scholars, in fact, have no mind for scrutiny—their very jobs are on the line. English departments throughout the country, many that paid hardly any real attention to the one or two writers on their staffs, now realize that their graduate programs will collapse unless failing graduate enrollments are bolstered by huge increases in the only area that shows student interest—creative writing. And so the departments turn to their black sheep, their wayward sons and daughters, to save them from—what?—five sections of Freshman Comp and nobody to fill in the seats in their classes in their specialties. The writer, once tolerated, the shady peripheral figure lost in his own turmoils, becomes respectable.

As much a casualty as the serious writer in this setting is the notion of standards of quality. It no longer matters that the poet on the staff is good or not. It no longer matters if she still needs to be reminded of the gap existent between her work and, say, Marianne Moore's. Forget Marianne Moore. Forget Emily Dickinson. Forget all of that. What matters is that our poet is a personality, a good recruiter, congenial in the classroom, and willing to give hundreds of hours salving the egos of our dozens of new graduate-student poets and storytellers. We no longer worry about his metaphors, her rhythms, what he knows or how persuasive she may be; we worry about how good he is on committee, if she is accessible enough to students, how well they are apprised of the "new realities," and how cooperative they are toward the aims and goals of the new team. One of my colleagues phrased it beautifully during our search for a new creative writer for our burgeoning program—our writer needs to be, he said, "a beacon" on the plains, to call in students to our school. I did not think he was talking about me, although my face was red enough for both of us.

The result of what may seem like a series of small compromises, a little yielding here and there to expedience, readjusting our ideals to comply with the budget, looking the other way, whistling while our backs are turned, being friendlier than we would be normally, accepting that which is contentedly mediocre in place of the work of high ambition which we had formerly expected and indeed demanded, lowering our academic standards to make room for the swarms of new students our budget requires, is finally, in sum, a large betrayal. Coming as it has upon us here in the mid nineteen-eighties, it all but dooms these last years of our century. For the serious scholar as well as for the serious poet, the new communion of the rival arts dooms both, since little if any good and worthy work is going to come out of English departments who have sold their souls to "creative writing." The good and serious poets and fiction writers will be worked to death (or boredom) courting and encouraging the student-writers. The good and serious scholars, in order to keep teaching their specialties, will fill their classrooms with students who care ultimately nothing for Eliot or Yeats, who care only for their own work, their own writing, their new and exciting careers—and who cannot be expected to do any serious research or critical writing. Keeping classes filled will be achieved, but the honor of the tradition will wither away.

Onto this depressing scene in April 1986 wanders our traveling poet, our guest poet of the month, Martha Collins. She is energetic, enthusiastic, vivacious, and intelligent. She has consented not only to read from her book of poems but to visit classes, talk privately in conference with individual graduate students, submit to a party or two, go to lunch, be the guest of honor at a reception and the occasion for a visit to a fancy restaurant. In class she is articulate and generous. She is friendly toward the undergraduates. She is somewhat confessional, perhaps just enough, and yet secure in her references to poetic traditions and major figures. She has read the right books. She reads some of her own poems. She submits to questions about them, admitting, wisely, that a lot of what she now knows she did not know when she wrote the poems. She also endearingly admits to confusion as to what her writing means and why she does it. She is able to locate some of her impulse to write in her perception of herself as a young person, and so forth. It is all beautifully open and open-hearted. An abundance of health and good cheer fills the room. That writing poetry is a lonely art, and a difficult one, that it often springs from desolation and alienation as much as from a pleasant curiosity and good will, is not within her range or reach. The overall high spirits of the occasion forbid such talk. Her check in payment for her visit, generous as it is, forbids such talk. The many fine and friendly people she has met, the many pleasant occasions she has been the center of, forbid it. Even were Martha Collins cognizant of such darker things, as indeed she must be, it is somehow unseemly to voice anything dark or discouraging. Writing is natural. Writing is healthy. It's "fun," she says. She smiles. The class smiles back at her.

There is but one problem. It is the problem of her work. What I will say of it I say reluctantly but in an effort to make a full statement of all the various elements involved here at Creative Writing U. If I talk about the cost of the lowering of standards and the effects on the morale of people who expect more, not less, one must realize that such a judgment matters deeply to Martha Collins too, who wants the best she has from herself in the time she has left. If our age demands the wrong things from poets, and poets give in to these misguided expectations, to the detriment of their own work, then the cost is borne directly by the poet, ultimately, perhaps most savagely. Writing programs are like all corporations—the individual matters not a lot—and they are quick to hire new people as the old wear out or move on—but it is the poet at sixty, his or her creative life essentially over, who must face the truth of what was won and lost, and the price paid.

Martha Collins's work is not good. Or it is not good now, despite the praise rendered unto it. Whether or not it will become better, richer, bolder, is important to her, I'm sure, and to me, but it is probably not important to her fellow administrators. The sort of poetry Martha Collins is writing is what used to be called, ten years ago or so—when critics were quick to be hard on such things—workshop poetry. The poems are about nothing much at all except maybe the problem of their own existence. Here is a poem from *The Catastrophe of Rainbows*, the book the poet read from, "Several Things":

> Several things could happen in this poem.
> Plums could appear, on a pewter plate.
> A dead red hare, hung by one foot.
> A vase of flowers. Three shallots.

A man could sing, in a burgundy robe
with a gold belt tied in a square knot.
Someone could untie the knot.
A woman could toss a gold coin.

A stranger could say the next line,
"I have been waiting for this,"
and offer a basket piled with apples
picked this morning, before the rain.

It could rain in this poem,
but if it rained, the man would continue
to sing as the burgundy silk fell
to the polished parquet floor.

It could snow in this poem:
0.5remember how the hunter stamped his feet
before he leaned his gun in the corner
and hung his cap on the brass hook?

Perhaps the woman should open the ebony bench
and find the song her mother used to sing.
Listen: the woman is playing the song.
The man is singing the words.

Meanwhile the hunter is taking a warm bath
in the clean white tub with clawed legs.
Or has the hunter left? Are his boots
making tracks in the fallen snow?

When does the woman straighten the flowers?
Is that before the hunter observes
the tiny pattern on the vase?
Before the man begins to peel the shallots?

Now it is time for the woman
to slice the apples into a blue bowl.
A child could be watching the unbroken peel
spiral below the knife.

Last but not least, you could appear.
You could be the red-cheeked child,

the hunter, or the stranger.
You could stay for a late meal.

A Provençal recipe.
A bright red hare, shot at dawn.
Shallots. Brandy. Pepper, salt.
An apple in the pan.

The poem pretends to be about writing, the creative act, the various and many options available to the writer. What it fails to demonstrate or to propose is what it itself lacks, a sense of necessity or urgency. The people in the poem lack real identities. They are objects, not any more interesting than the dead hare or the blue bowl. They are factors or elements to be manipulated according to some formula, and as such are briefly sketched in, the child "red-cheeked," the woman making a meal. As a simplified construct and grid of possible placements and substitutions within a sketchy narrative, the poem bids for some universal applicability, but in doing so it loses or forsakes or renounces the drama and inherent value of particularity, the power of *what happened*, the mystery of memory, the threatening reality of the fact that we live always in a world our feelings make valid, a world whose meaning and value is always at risk. This poem risks nothing. It offends no one by having anything committed or anyone committed to anything. Everything is somehow conditional or invented, and so it refuses to commit the indiscretion of subject or point of view. The poem will not be personal, since being personal means taking responsibility for what one says and what one thinks.

And so it is the quintessential workshop poem. Reading it, the student can plug in his or her own details, but more probably reading it the student poet will imitate the poem's coolness and dispassion, thereby producing more such poems of detachment. Though the poem has no immediate involvement with real life, it does derive its mode and what little energy it has from the example of other poems like it. The teachers here are John Ashbery, of course, who stresses nondeterminancy, and the recent work of Donald Justice, probably Martha Collins's teacher at Iowa. Justice's recent work is characterized by a strict and stringent retreat not only from the formal passions of his earlier, more successful work, but a retreat from subject as well, into the self, where nothing is really real but the little maneuvers the self makes in a world totally arbitrary. Mark Strand's influence bears on the poem too. Lacking resolve, then, devoid of passion as it is, it makes virtues of its deficiencies.

There are many such poems in this book. As blank and reduced and minimal as "Several Things" is, a poem like "White Room" is even more minimal. The trick of the workshop poem has always been, when confronted by criticism as to its lack of ambitiousness, to offer poems even less ambitious as foils to itself:

A woman sits in a white room.
She stares at the white walls,

the white ceiling,
the white sky outside.

Her chair is white, her dress is white.
She has turned her silver mirror
against the wall.

A man calls.
He talks about a white world.
Everywhere, the white clouds.

The page is blank, she says.
It will not turn.

This is easy writing. And it is, I suppose, intended to be easy. The student sitting in the audience, hearing the poem read, may say, Gosh, I can write stuff like that. And he will. He will thereby be encouraged to apply to a creative writing program. Probably there is one at the local campus of the community college. Within five years there will be a creative writing program available for anyone in America within safe driving distance of his home. Our student today, however, is already here. He has but to make the formal application, and hand over the money. In class he will learn how much fun writing is, and how easy it is. He will learn how to write poems in sentences of no more than six words, how to use colors for their evocative power, how to get a simple word like "against" to provide nearly all the energy in an otherwise exhausted poem. For his M.F.A. degree he will submit for his thesis project, instead of a scholarly paper on some real writer, a collection of his own poems. It will be called "Blue Room," and its title poem will start like this: "A man sits in a blue room. / He stares at the blue walls, / the blue ceiling, / the blue sky outside."

Here is another Martha Collins poem, "Snow":

Gloves on the table. A walnut table.
An ivory candle. A brass stem.
Coat on the back of a brown velvet chair.
Hand on the coat. On the hand a hand.
Is this the start of a story?

Now it is winter. Soon it will snow.
Then the drapes will be drawn together.
A woman's coat. Fur-lined gloves.
Perhaps the woman will lay the fire
while the man is pouring brandy. Yes.

Five years ago a Doberman froze
in the yard next door to her parent's
  yard.
From the kitchen window they watched
  it arch,
trying to touch itself with itself,
until one day it walked away

from the house to the open part of the
  yard
and made a nest in the snow.
That was the day they had meant to
  complain.
A fire burned in the house.
There were lights in the windows.

Let the woman forget the coat
on the chair, the gloves on the table.
Here is the brandy. The oval glass.
Let her think of the clean white sheets.
The hands. The nest of his body.

Tell her to light the fire. Tell her *Snow*.

This poem is very similar to the other two in that it discourages involvement with things beyond the cozy interior and the self. In this case, however, there really is an emergency of sorts, the fact that a dog is being left to freeze to death, but the people do not react except to consider reacting. Instead, they have their usual drinks by the fire. As an expression of apathy the poem has its potential impact, but it is not clear that the poem condemns the indifference of the people. In talking about the poem in class, Martha Collins made quite a bit of the fact that the incident with the dog really occurred, and seemed quite excited about how the dog tried to curl itself up into the smallest possible shape to avoid freezing. What she seemed unaware of is the guilt she ought to suffer for having been uninvolved.

Perhaps Collin's most ambitious poem touches on these matters. The poem is called "In Argentina" and concerns the famous movie we all heard about in the seventies where a woman involved in a pornographic movie is actually killed on screen. The poem is too long to quote in its entirety, but let me give you a couple stanzas:

> I want to tell you everything,
> how somewhere in Argentina
> where rivers are salty
> and cattle graze and wheat
> grows ripe in the winter sun,
> someone, sipping local wine,
> may say it first as a kind
> of joke, but they know before
> they go to the room, before
> they settle the price they know
> they will not have to pay.
>
> Meanwhile, somewhere in Iowa,
> say, where animals fatten
> on corn and the soil darkens
> when furrows fill up with snow,
> a man may be taking a woman
> into a room. This is all
> supposing, but think of a house
> set back from a road,
> imagine guns in a closet,
> some pictures under a chair.
> The man should be polite,
> mentioning killers, if at all,
> as men in the morning news.

And so on. Because of the nature of the subject this does not at first seem like a workshop poem. It seems just the opposite, involved not with some private self and the little games that self can play as a writer, but in the recreation of and examination of something of serious public concern. The poem seems to ask how such monstrous things are possible, and asks us to stretch our imaginations in order to appreciate what actually occurred. But this is an altogether safe subject, and as such an especially literary one. The reader, be he or she a decent and civilized person, will not expect the poet to test her imaginative powers on making the horror of the murder graphically real. As delivered to a sophisticated college literary audience, and contemporary poetry has no other audience, the poem can rely on the guilty conscience of nearly everyone in the room. All of us are nearly shell-shocked over what we now know has been done in the name of art, of democracy, for freedom, just as nearly all of us are in the midst of the battle to rid our minds and our language of sexual stereotypes and sexist conventions. The effort to make all people equal before the law, before the inquisition of the dollar, and to grant to all people as much veracity and validity as we grant ourselves is an ongoing struggle. If we are the least bit comfortable in our homes, in our pocketbooks, we are necessarily then susceptible to the criticism this poem levels against us and our safe lives. Where were we when this was taking place? Why did we not act? Have we never ever had some similar nightmarish desire? Have we never ever abused another person, or seen a woman in a sexual way? And so on. The answer must be yes, because of course the poem will not allow a different answer. We are guilty because we are alive, guilty because Martha Collins is the one writing the poem, reading the poem to us, and we are the ones sitting in the chairs, inert, having nothing else to do but come to a poetry reading.

This is another sort of trick of the workshop poem. Its design is something like this: The poet herself is not involved with the world, or unwilling to engage anything or to risk anything, and this truth will surely become obvious to the reader or to the audience. But this development, which would then be damaging to the poet, can be averted if the audience is made to direct criticism at itself for its own greater failure in the face of the world's causes and opportunities. If the poet is guilty of failing to engage honestly her own life, how much greater the reader's failure, for instance, to save the Jews, or prevent racism. And so "In Argentina" is a poem in bad faith. It is not legitimately concerned with the pain of the killed woman, nor is it legitimately concerned with the aberration of the killers. Its purpose is to deflect criticism from the poet.

Martha Collins directs the Creative Writing Program at the University of Massachusetts—Boston. To direct a creative writing program takes special talents. One needs to be able to budget, to organize, to recruit students, to keep them happy, to set up courses for them to take, to establish committees comprised of sympathetic teachers, to set up schedules of exams and deadlines, to see that students achieve candidacy at the proper time, to listen to complaints, to bring in visiting poets and fiction writers, to organize departmental occasions, readings, prize competitions, perhaps to distribute assistantships and fellowships as equitably as possible; to make, in short, the whole thing run smoothly. Such a job does not require the writing of poems. One can be an indifferent poet, maybe even a terrible poet, and still be a fine administrator. There have been such cases. I have heard of them. Martha Collins, like it or not, may just become another one. What is so sad, however, is that it is impossible to talk about her poetry without realizing how essential she must be to the financial well-being of the writing program she directs. And that, of course, because she is a person of influence and power, her poems, no matter what they are, will be taken seriously. When she was here, we filled our library for her reading. Less than a week earlier, nine women gathered in the same place to read their poetry as part of the annual woman's day celebration. There was hardly anyone in attendance. The poets read essentially to each other. From what I heard, all of them write as well as Martha Collins, and I had the sure sense that four or five of them write with greater passion and conviction.

Martha Collins is certainly not the cause of the collapse of artistic standards—she is, instead, surely a victim of it, as are we all. I would not be writing about her except that the occasion of her visit coincided with the time I was beginning to draft this essay. There is, probably, no acceptable way to apologize to her for using her work as I have. And yet I mean to apologize, and to wish only the best for her and for her poetry. Let me say that any of hundreds of other traveling poets on the reading tours could have served as well—some, perhaps, even better—to show the state of the art as it is presently corrupted. Even as I make this statement I realize how easy it is to make but how nearly impossible it would be to prove. Such generalizations are defeated always by particular exceptions, and we should hope that they would be. And if we care for the ultimate health of poetry it is the exception, the best, always, that we look to to learn from and for value. (One would not wish to want to *have* to prove such statements, to go to lengths of examinations dozens, hundreds of times!) This approach, however, is what all of us use, for self-protection, when we perform the onerous task of sorting through decades of work produced by generations other than our own, and yet we are, I think, always startled to discover how *much* was bad; how little has lasted, how little deserved to last. Happily there is always enough, has been enough, that has life and energy to initiate renewal, and to return us to our own work and our own generation with confidence.

What is so special about our current scene—so discouraging—is the terrible vastness of the mass, volume, and weight of mediocrity that afflicts us. It is no longer a matter merely of closing the books with relief, the books we did not write, and leaving the dusty library behind. The dust accompanies us. At readings it fills our ears. It fills our mouths. And so we write, when we write, in a hurry, to be published quickly and with little attention paid to that which passes almost instantaneously into obscurity. The little that is to be learned, the little that is to be gained, being a poet in America today, or a reader of poetry, as measured against the degree of our longing and the indifference that is met, produces a factor in futility. Perhaps only computers can properly appreciate the problem, though computers are incapable of suffering it. They cannot be discouraged, only turned on or off. Perhaps this is why the human occasion, the public reading, the celebration of poetry, such as we have it hundreds of times each day all over America, has taken on the desperate importance it has. Far from the computers—far from the computer terminals at which the millions of poets of us are writing our poems—there is a brief respite from it all. The poets shut down for a while, agree to be quiet, agree to sit with courtesy and let somebody read aloud, and to honor that reading. The substance of the poetry itself may not matter, what the poems are about or whether or not they are good. It is the human voice we need to hear, and not some mindless buzzing in our ears. One might even suggest that the incredible proliferation of creative writing indicates a desperate attempt to validate the personal and the human in the face of gigantic impersonal forces arrayed against us. I will try not to forget this in my lament for all that is gone from our poetry.

GREG KUZMA

CONTRIBUTORS

JAY PARINI's most recent book of poetry is *Anthracite Country*; Holt, Rinehart and Winston will soon publish his new novel, *The Patch Boys*. A professor at Middlebury College, he has an A.C.L.S. Fellowship this fall.

WILLIAM TROWBRIDGE* has contributed to several literary journals. A Vanderbilt Ph.D., he is a professor of English at Northwest Missouri State University.

LESLIE ULLMAN* is a graduate of Skidmore and holds an M.F.A. from Iowa. Her work has appeared in many literary and popular magazines, and in 1979 her first book, *Natural Histories*, was chosen for the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award.

CAROLYN KIZER has two books forthcoming this year: *The Nearness of You* (Copper Canyon), poems, and *Carrying Over* (St. Andrews), translations. Last year, she won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry.

SUSAN WOOD* has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Antaeus*, *Ploughshares*, and other journals. She is a graduate of Rice University, where she now teaches English. In 1981, Holt published her first book, *Bazaar*.

PHILIP DACEY's most recent books are *The Man with Red Suspenders* (Milkweed Editions, 1986) and *Strong Measures: Contemporary American Poetry in Traditional Forms* (Harper & Row, 1985), co-edited with David Jauss.

MARY KARR has recent articles on Thomas Lux in *Seneca Review* and Stephen Dobyns in *APR*. She has been teaching at Emerson College, in Boston.

JEANNE MURRAY WALKER's most recent book, *Fugitive Angels* (1985), has just been selected by the N.E.A. as an American entry in the International Book Fair next year. She lives in Philadelphia.

LEN ROBERTS* has appeared in The *Georgia*, *Virginia Quarterly*, and *Missouri* Reviews, and elsewhere. In 1984, he published *From the Dark* with the SUNY Press. A winner of several literary awards and fellowships, he teaches at Northampton County Area Community College, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

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KATHERINE SONIAT's *Notes of Departure* (Walt Whitman Center) won the Camden Poetry Award last year. She has new work in *Prairie Schooner* and *The New Virginia Quarterly*.

BARRI ARMITAGE* has taught poetry in elementary and high schools; last year she was a scholar at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. She lives in Silver Spring, Maryland.

JUDITH SKILLMAN was a finalist last year in the Discovery/*The Nation* competition. Her work has appeared in several little magazines, and she teaches business communication at Bellevue Community College, in Washington.

MARIA FLOOK has just completed a second collection of poems; her first book was *Reckless Wedding* (Houghton Mifflin). She teaches at the University of North Carolina, in Asheville.

GREG KUZMA's most recent book is *Of China and of Greece* (Sun Press). He teaches at the University of Nebraska, in Lincoln.

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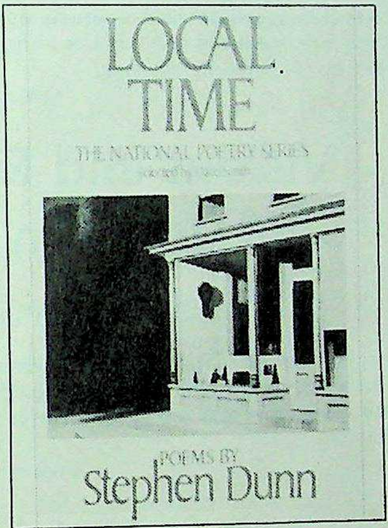

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